

PREACHING FOR TODAY

**WANTING
THE
IMPOSSIBLE**

George B. Duncan



George Duncan's

WANTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

IN *Wanting the Impossible* the preacher speaks of the fundamentals of the Gospel faith and the sins which "so easily beset us". In the clarity and simplicity which make George Duncan's preaching so powerful and effective the Biblical message is expounded; he then applies the message to life as he knows it through the wide range of human relationships he meets with in his ministry.

George Duncan: Vicar of Christ Church, Cockfosters. His messages are eagerly listened to in the evangelistic crusades.

WANTING THE IMPOSSIBLE



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PREACHING FOR TODAY

WANTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

by

GEORGE B. DUNCAN

*Vicar of Christ Church
Cockfosters*



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Dedicated to
Those who pray for me

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PREFACE

THE following addresses have been preached more than once to different congregations. The lessons they seek to emphasize have been born out of a study of the Word of God in relation to the needs of the Christian living out his or her life in the context of the Christian Church. They make no claim to bear the marks of profound scholarship, but are marked, if by anything at all, by a simplicity of thought and language that God has been mercifully pleased to bless. It is only the knowledge that these messages have been helpful to some of my patient hearers that gives me courage to send them out with the prayer that my readers too may experience the same divine blessing. My greatest debt I owe to those to whom I have dedicated this book, the company of those at whose faithfulness I shall never cease to wonder, and for whose affection and friendship I shall never cease to be grateful; the company of those who pray for me.

GEORGE B. DUNCAN.

*"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ:
for it is the power of God unto salvation to
every one that believeth."* Romans 1: 16

I

THE GOSPEL WE PREACH

IT is a strange fact about life that many people who are careful and explicit and exact in almost every department of their lives are at the same time, when it comes to spiritual things, content with vague uncertainties.

Any lady going to shop will be explicit in her requests. A boy planning his career will be exact in his ambitions. But when it comes to matters of religion and especially of Christian faith we find so often that clarity is replaced by vagueness, and that we are in the realms of "I think so" or "I hope so".

I want to consider with you the character of the Christian gospel entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, and as a basis for this I want to take the words of St. Paul in Romans 1: 16, words both clear and comprehensive. He says there: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

It is worth noting that St. Paul says here three things about the gospel. It is (i) the Power of God; it is (ii) unto Salvation; it is (iii) to Every One that Believeth.

Let us take the central phrase first of all and consider this. Paul says the Christian gospel is "*unto salvation*". This suggests *the existence of a danger*.

The word salvation is a strong word. It is not a word invented by any particular brand of Christianity, but a word stamped with the authority of Jesus Christ Himself, who said that He came "to seek *and to save* that which was lost". The word found its way into the language of the gospels at the very commencement of His life on earth—"Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins."

The gospel does not say that men need just to be helped, or that they need to be advised or strengthened or guided. It says they need to be saved. Whenever we use the word saved it carries with it a sense of urgency, a sense of desperation, an awareness of danger. For example, I could say, and say truly, that penicillin has saved my life! Some years ago when I developed septicaemia the numerous and frequent injections of penicillin that I received did literally save my life. By contrast, some years earlier, before the discovery of penicillin, my elder sister went down with the same disease, but at that time there was no certain cure for it and within a few days she died.

Why is it then that in Christianity there is this note of urgency, this note of seriousness? It is a note that is indeed beginning to find its way more and more into the thinking of men today in this atomic age, when man's powers of destruction are so extensive and terrifying that it would seem almost as if all human life might be destroyed in a moment of time.

The answer of the Christian faith is twofold. Man needs to be saved (1) because of *the sinfulness of man*. The Christian diagnosis of man's condition is not an optimistic one, but it is, I believe, an accurate and true diagnosis. On all hands today men are facing up to the moral implications and ramifications of sin. We recognize the problem of moral evil, while we differ in our diagnosis of its root and cause. There are those who say that the root cause of moral evil in the world lies in

man's ignorance and the remedy is to be found in education, basing their approach on an optimistic, humanistic approach, convinced of man's inherent goodness.

Such people assume that man will do the right thing if he knows what is right, and that the way to remedy the moral evils of the world is to teach people what is right, and the result—they will do what is right.

But surely it is obvious from the facts of human experience that man's problem is not just to know what is right. Our problem is that when we do know what is right we are not willing to do what is right, and even if we are willing to do it, we are not able to do it. We haven't the desire, we haven't the strength. Christianity, while recognizing an element of truth in this approach to the problem, will not agree that this is the whole truth.

Others, basing their diagnosis upon a happy confidence in the inherent goodness of man, take the line that the real root and source of moral evil in the world lies in man's environment. This approach is a social one rather than educational, the argument here being that if only you can give people enough things you will remedy the cause of moral evil. Higher wages, better houses, a higher standard of living. Along this line is the answer to be found. But surely again here the facts of experience run counter to this approach.

For if this were really true, that environment is the decisive factor and relevant, as it may well be, then we could assume that those people living in the best environments with the highest wages and the nicest houses would be the best people, the most upright. But experience simply does not bear this out. Indeed, some of the choicest characters are often found in the most difficult environments.

Another approach that is more modern is along the line of political experiment, which sees the bogey in man's freedom. Here there is no optimistic confidence in the inherent good-

ness of man, but a very real scepticism which says, in fact, that if man will not do the unselfish thing of his own free will, he will be made to do it by law. If, for example, he insists in his selfishness and lawlessness upon trying to make an unfair profit, we will remove the top slice of it with an excess profits tax. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not you can really make people good by law or whether the reverse happens. For if you are going to make people good by law, then laws must be made to cover every relationship and every activity of human life. But to multiply laws means to increase the likelihood of law-breaking, and to increase law-breaking means to decrease any respect for law—which in its turn leads to still more law-breaking!

Christianity, while recognizing an element of truth in all these approaches and realizing that ignorance, environment and freedom all have to be considered, probes deeper and states quite clearly that the root source of man's moral problem lies within man's own nature. It was Jesus Christ who said, "From within, out of the heart of man, proceed . . ." and then went on to enumerate the kind of moral problems which beset our human lot today.

The Christian gospel states that man is "born in sin". Not that it means by this that there is anything sinful about the fact of man's birth, but rather that there is something inherently sinful about the nature of man at birth. Christianity would trace this back to the time when man first sinned. Whether or not we believe that the form in which the story of Genesis 3 is told is literal and historical fact, we can believe the fact for which it stands, namely, that there was a time when man first sinned.

Years ago when I was a student at Edinburgh University I had the privilege of studying under the late Professor A. E. Taylor, Professor of Moral Philosophy. I well remember in the midst of one of his lectures how he paused, and looking

up at the students in front of him said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please remember there must have been an Adam." In other words, there must have been an occasion when man sinned for the first time, and from that day to this, through heredity, the whole personality of man in the physical and mental realms of life, and in the spiritual realm also, bears traces of a heredity of sin.

Surely it was this that lay behind the words of a little girl in one of my churches, who said to her mother when being put to bed one night, "Mummy, why is it that there is something inside me that likes being naughty?" That may not have been the language of the schools, but it was the truth of the Christian gospel. Man needs to be saved because of the sinfulness of man. But Christianity would go further and state that man needs to be saved because of (2) *the seriousness of sin*.

The Bible does not take a light view of sin. The seriousness of sin lies in two aspects of it. First of all in the power of sin. It was David, the king, who cried out in agony of soul, "My sins are mightier than I", and Jesus Christ added His verdict on the power of sin when He said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of it."

These are days when there is a lot of superficial and shallow talk about freedom, and we do well to realize the fact that although we may think we are free to do as we like, we are not free to stop doing it. The power of sin to become habitual is something that every life knows. How many there are who are held by habit, fettered by fear or caught by the consequences of their own deeds. But the seriousness of sin is to be found not only in its power but also in its penalty.

We cannot and must not treat sin purely as a social problem or as a personal inconvenience. The Bible states explicitly that sin involves God and, as a transgression of the law, it carries a penalty. We could illustrate this very simply from everyday life. Supposing I was driving my car down the main road,

and in a moment of inattention was involved in an accident by running into the back of a stationary car. I might regard this accident as one of mere personal inconvenience to me. It would mean my car being off the road for repairs for a week or two. But I might have with me in the car a companion with a very warped sense of humour who might think the whole thing intensely amusing, and be tickled to death to think that I was involved in such an accident. But I could not have such an accident on a main road in this country without a further element being added to the situation. In a matter almost of minutes a smart blue car would drive up and out of it would come two men in dark blue uniform and I would suddenly discover to my dismay that what to me was a personal inconvenience, to my friend a matter of great amusement, was to these two an offence in the sight of the law! The penalty that sin carries with it is stated quite clearly. "The wages of sin is death", separation from God.

Here is the whole background of the Christian gospel, the existence of a danger; men need to be saved. You need to be saved, I need to be saved, and so the Christian gospel is "unto salvation".

But Paul states also and equally emphatically that the gospel of Jesus Christ is "the power of God". This suggests secondly *the experience of a dynamic*, the dynamic of God. How are we to interpret this aspect of the Christian gospel in the light of history and human experience?

Christianity affirms, firstly, that the power of God has acted *in the past, in history*. This is the significance of the doctrine of the incarnation as it is stated, "The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." In the incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, we have the evidence of the power of God, the dynamic of God at work. Sometimes one comes across individuals who

state that they can't believe in the incarnation. They believe in God, they say, but they are not prepared to believe that Jesus Christ was God. Their objection is based upon their belief that God could not do such a thing. My own reaction to such an attitude is this: what knowledge of God does such a person possess which gives him the right to state either that God could do or could not do such a thing? The answer to that is of course that they have no knowledge of God which gives them any right to say that God could not do anything! Why is it that people are so eagerly prepared to limit God? The God they have conceived in their mind is as much a human manufactured article as the ugly idol of the Indian temple, or the wooden image of the African jungle.

But Christianity does not think in terms of a man-made God. The element of miracle is inherent in the Christian faith; the miracle of Christ's birth began His life on earth, the miracle of the resurrection completed it. And so the Christian gospel states that the power of God was operative in human history in the coming of Jesus Christ. But if the power of God was evidenced in the birth of Christ, the Christian gospel states clearly, emphatically, that the power of God was active in His death.

For when we turn to that life we find the whole emphasis of thought moves steadily towards the climax of the Cross, and that in that dying there was a doing. A "doing" by God who "in Christ was reconciling the world unto Himself". In that death there was an element of mystery, but, if the New Testament has any meaning at all, the Cross states the one supreme fact that in the mystery of that death God was dealing once and for all with the problem of man's guilt in God's own holy sight.

"We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains He had to bear,

But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.
He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to Heaven,
Saved by His precious blood."

The heart of the Christian gospel then lies in the declaration of that which God has done for men, not of something that man must do for God. It is this that constitutes the gospel as "Good News".

Years ago in Edinburgh there was a Christian Commando Campaign in which the Christian commandos went to the people where they could find them. In an evening paper the report was given of one such visit to a public house. The Christian commando, thinking he was making a wise opening for conversation, said to a man propping up the bar, "If Jesus Christ was here speaking to you what would He ask you to give Him?" The man's reply revealed a greater understanding of the Christian gospel than the Christian commando's question, for the man replied in these words: "If Jesus Christ were here speaking to me, He would not ask me to give Him anything. He would want to give me something."

Is that not the message for which the Cross stands, and towards which the incarnation reaches? The message of a dying which was a doing. A doing in which the dynamic of God dealt once and for all with the sins of the world.

But the Christian gospel declares not only the power of God operating in past history, but also *in present experience*. For after Good Friday comes Easter Day, and after that Ascensiontide, and then Pentecost with the message proclaimed with such living certainty from the pages of the New Testament—that the Christ who died, lives and is to be received, that men may have in their sinfulness and in their

weakness the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. It is this then which is the message of Christ, to go to the weakest and the worst and to proclaim that supreme truth: "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation."

How frequently this amazing truth stands out from the pages of the New Testament; "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The gospel does not ask men to turn over a new leaf in their own strength, but it does offer to men a new life in which the power of God will become operative in their personalities, bringing in new desires, new wisdom, new strength, new joy, so that in the truest and deepest sense of the word a man is "born again", i.e. has become the possessor of an entirely new life, new and distinct from the old in its very essence as well as its attributes, for it is the very life of Jesus Christ brought in by the Holy Spirit into our hearts and our lives.

So the Christian gospel speaks to men of the experience of a dynamic, the dynamic of God. There is just one more phrase that remains to be dealt with. St. Paul declares that the gospel of Jesus Christ is "the power of God unto salvation to *every one that believeth*". Here then is the final note in the Christian gospel. We have considered that it stresses the existence of a danger, that it suggests the experience of a dynamic, and here finally we must consider surely *the emphasis on a decision*. It is "to every one that believeth". There are just two brief comments that I would make here.

The first is that this emphasis on a decision is (1) *reasonable*. I have never been able to understand why it is that so many people seem to think that decision ought not to find a place in religious experiences, particularly when it finds its place in every other realm of life. A captain of a team will decide who is to bat first, a lady buying a hat will decide ultimately which out of many she will purchase. A child spending its pocket-money will decide what to buy. A man facing life will decide

what he is going to be. Everyone in almost every relationship of life is accustomed to make decisions. Why then should we think that Christianity is to be experienced as a result of intellectual and individual drift? We don't surely expect to become Christians by chance! Clearly it will be by choice. Yes, such an emphasis on a decision is reasonable and it is also (2) *essential*. Essential if the whole plan of salvation is to have a moral foundation. For man is a moral being with the power of choice. Salvation can't be foisted on man and the integrity of human personality just ignored, and so it is that what Christ did for us, and can become to us and in us, becomes ours in personal experience when we put our trust in Him, just as all the skill and ability of a brilliant surgeon becomes effectively mine when I put my trust in him.

In this faith or believing which lies at the heart of the Christian gospel message there are surely these two simple elements. The first, a complete dependence upon the ability of Jesus Christ, and the second, a complete obedience to His authority; and so it is that the proclamation of the Christian gospel involves preaching "for a verdict". A verdict which will result in either the salvation of our lives, as well as of our souls, or their eternal loss.

"Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

2 Sam. 23: 15

2

WANTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

I SUPPOSE that it would be true to say that no character in the Old Testament record has had such an attraction for us as that of David, the shepherd king. From the earliest days of our childhood we have loved to hear of his exploits as the slayer of Goliath, as the friend of Jonathan, and as the king of Israel.

I want you to think over with me some words which are found in one of the choicest incidents in that life of many incidents. "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

It is David, the king, who speaks. He is a king in name, but he has still to make himself king in fact. Saul had indeed been slain in battle but the enemies of Israel still overran the country; indeed, when the news reached the Philistines that David had been made king a fresh and more determined attack was made to overthrow the kingdom of Israel.

There were tasks enough to make even the bravest spirit falter.

I wonder if it happened in the evening that David went out with three of his senior officers to reconnoitre the position of the enemy troops, and there, climbing to the top of a rise in

the ground, he suddenly saw the flickering lights of the fires of the Philistines' camp spread out before him and yonder, on the further side, lying in the fold of the hills, the lights of Bethlehem itself.

Bethlehem, the scene of his boyhood, a place with a thousand memories! and feeling suddenly wearied with the weight of the responsibility he carried, a great desire swept over him, a longing to taste of the water of the well by the gate.

For a moment the king was a boy again and standing there, looking across the valley, he was lost in dreams of bygone days. Lost in reverie, David didn't notice that three of his senior officers had left his side. They had heard the king's words and we read that "they brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, and brought it to David".

How long David stood there we don't know, but he was roused at last by the return of these three with the precious water, brought at the peril of their lives. Stunned and amazed by the devotion and their costly gift, David accepted it and then poured it out on the ground in thanksgiving as a gift to God.

That is the story recorded for us. What message does it hold?

"Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

I want to suggest that here we have the record of A CRAVING THAT WAS INTOLERABLE. I am sure that the longing that swept over David was more than one of mere physical thirst. That sudden glimpse of Bethlehem lying in the fold of the hills had brought back a sudden wave of memories of his boyhood days, its scenes and its faces. Days standing in such marked contrast to the life he was now living. At that moment David, the king, would have given anything to have been a boy again.

I wonder how many of us have shared this longing with David. Something has happened and suddenly the door of memory has been flung open, and the scenes and faces of our childhood days have come crowding before us. It may have been the singing of a hymn that we learned as children, or the face of a little child looking up trustfully to ours—a sudden glimpse of a landscape that seemed like the countryside we had known. The scent of burning leaves, a text of scripture. I don't know what it might have been or might not have been, but at that moment we found ourselves looking into the past and we would have given almost anything to have been children again. The contrast between those days and the present days was like a sudden stab of pain.

I wonder if David was thinking of *The Innocency of the Bethlehem days*. Like so many of us, David was a man with memories he would give anything to forget. The past held moments he would give anything to undo. To have the chance to live the days over again and avoid the mistakes! To recover the fair promises of his youth, to have a life without the stain of sin upon it!

As the grim face of the warrior king looked towards Bethlehem did he see there the smiling, laughing face of the boy he once was stopping by the well, and stooping to drink of the water of the well by the gate?

I wonder if you have felt as I have when looking into the face of a child—an almost passionate longing that the child might never grow up to sin as men and women sin. That the children might somehow keep the fresh unstained promise of youth with the simplicity of their faith in Christ, and their love for the things of God.

Are there some readers who have known something of this—a longing, a fierce desire, that has suddenly gripped you by the throat? You too, like David, have memories you

would like to forget—have made mistakes that you would give anything to undo. If only you could turn back the hands of the clock and be a child again.

“Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!”

The Innocency of childhood, or was it *the Irresponsibility of the Bethlehem days* for which David longed? As David stood there looking over the sleeping hills was he thinking how carefree the Bethlehem days had been, when the burdens he had carried were light? His responsibility had been a flock of sheep, not a nation.

His enemies then had been the stray lion or bear, not the armed might and relentless hate of the Philistine hosts.

I wonder if a great weariness came over him. He was no king then; his tasks were simpler and his needs were met by his father Jesse. Whereas now the burdens were heavy. They seemed beyond his strength, the pressure was unending, the foe relentless.

Have some of us not felt like that? Our burdens of responsibility have seemed heavier than we could bear. It may have been the responsibility of a family, or of a business, or of administration. And there has come a moment when an almost intolerable craving has swept over us for the life we had known in our Bethlehem days.

The craving that was intolerable—and note the second thought that we read here, of THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT SEEMED INSURMOUNTABLE.

As David stood there looking towards Bethlehem he knew that the road to the well was blocked and barred against him. Wherever he looked he could see the glow and flicker of the camp-fires of the Philistine host, the forces of the enemy denying him access to the well of water by the gate. And as you and I look back at the Bethlehem days of our lives and long to recapture something of the same quality of life we

lived then, we too see that the way is blocked and that there are forces that lie between us and our desire.

What of *the Barring of the Road*? What are the forces that deny our access to the quality of life we long to recapture? What of the circle of friends we have made? Do these deny us access to the well? How many folk there are for whom the biggest factor that holds them back from the way of life that in their hearts they long to live, and in their minds they know they ought to live, is the fear of what their friends might say. They have settled down in a social circle whose opinion determines their actions. Their lives demonstrate the truth of the old words of wisdom that "the fear of man bringeth a snare".

But another factor that denies us access to the Bethlehem days is the passing of the years. Those years which can never be recalled. I remember reading of an incident in the life of Dr. Boreham who tells how once he was sitting reading quietly while two children were playing some game on the floor. Suddenly a voice spoke sharply "No back moves" and that set the doctor wondering. Was life like that? Are there no back moves in life ever? Was it not something like this that lay behind the objection of Nicodemus to the words of Christ, "Ye must be born again": "How can a man be born when he is old?" Is it really possible to turn back the hands of the clock and recapture the years that have been lost?

Then, too, what of the depths of sin to which we have sunk? It may be that some reading these words feel that they are finally and utterly disqualified from ever knowing anything of such a quality of life again, by the fact of failure and sin in their lives. If only it were possible! but of course it never could be. The road to the well is blocked and barred by the forces of the enemy denying access.

All I want to say is that while David dreamed three men

dared. "Three mighty men brake through the hosts of the Philistines and drew water out of the well and brought it to David."

In the story of David, the king, a trinity of manhood made the impossible come true. In your life and mind the trinity of the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, can do the same. For if our story speaks to us of the barring of the gate, it also speaks of *the Breaking through the Host*.

What shall we say of the passing of the years that can never be recalled? All I can say is this, that God can so use the years that remain that the quality of living achieved will more than compensate for the quality lost.

After all, it does not really matter how long you live; the vital matter is how you live. Some people live for seventy years who might just as well have never lived at all. Others die young or after giving a few years of Christian service, and yet in the few years of their living achieve great things, and leave an indelible mark upon their generation.

What of the circle of friends that you may have made? Two things I can say; the first is that God by the gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell your life can give you the courage and strength to break free from the shackles of social opinion. And secondly, that God in the fellowship of the Christian Church can give you a new circle of friends whose friendship will be of a higher quality and greater depth than anything you have ever known before.

And what do we say of the deeps of sin to which it may be some have sunk? All I can say is this, that in the word of God I read "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from *all* sin". When God says all sin He means it, and we have no right to make an exception where God makes none. For I read again in Romans 5: 20, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." The craving that was intolerable, the circumstances that seem insurmountable—and our story ends

on the highest note of all, for here we read of THE CONSECRATION THAT WAS INEVITABLE.

When the gift of the water from the well of Bethlehem was put into the hands of David the seemingly impossible had been realized. And what did David do with this gift?

We note, first of all, *his refusal* to use the gift for himself. He could have taken that gift and drunk the water, but no, he didn't. His refusal was matched by *his resolve* to give the gift wholly to God, and so he poured it out as an offering to God Himself.

I want to say this to you as I close: if God was to give you this day a new life, what would you do with it? Would you use it for yourself as you have used the life you have already had; or would you follow David in his refusal to do such a thing and in his resolve to give what he had received wholly to God? If you share the resolve that David made I say quite simply this last word to you, that a new life is exactly what God is offering you. Listen to this—"The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ".

That new life can be yours if you take it. Nay, rather, that new life can be yours if you receive Him who is the Life. If you will open your heart and life to receive Christ by the Holy Spirit He will enter your life, and then everything that is in Christ will be yours. You will be a child again—a child of God! For to "as many as received him, to them gave he power to become" the children of God, and the impossible will have come true in your life.

"What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?"

Matt. 27:22

3

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION IN THE WORLD

HE was a clergyman of the Church of England, and we met in a Belfast restaurant. I was interested to see that in his lapel he was wearing a badge. I had never seen one like it before and have not seen one since. It was in the shape of a silver question mark. I asked him what the badge meant, and in reply he said that it stood for "the most important question in the world". "What is that?" I asked him. Amongst the many, the scores, of questions that clamour for an answer in our minds, questions about life, about the Bible, questions about the Church, about society, questions about death, could it be that there is one question that stands out above all others as being the most important question in the world? I believe there is, and so did my clergyman friend. It was first put by a Roman Governor nearly 2,000 years ago, and it is this: "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?"

I want to look with you at the setting of the question, because I believe that the experience of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, that day has a great deal in common with your experience and mine in these modern times as we too face up to the most important question in the world.

Note, first of all, *the intrusion of Jesus Christ that was inevitable*. When we read in Matthew 27, verse 2, concerning the arrest of Jesus Christ, "When they had bound Jesus, they led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor", when we read that, we read the account of an event that Pilate had long known would happen inevitably. For that was not the first time that the name of Jesus Christ, or His person, had crossed the path of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor.

Think for a moment of *the reports of the person of Christ he must have heard*. The position of the Roman Governor in Palestine was no sinecure. The Jews had proved a difficult race to subdue and proved a still more difficult race to rule. The Roman Governor would have had an intelligence service equal to none, to keep him in the closest touch with anything that threatened the peace, that endangered the throne. And I venture to say that there was little about Jesus Christ that Pilate didn't know, and the information at his disposal was more complete than the gospel records at ours.

I wonder how often in the council chamber, or at the banqueting table, the name of Jesus Christ had come under discussion. His wife, too, was fascinated by the Nazarene, and when report came that He was in the city I wonder how often she would slip out with her Hebrew maid, her face veiled, so that she might not be recognized as she listened and watched, and then as she returned home to wonder.

But in these reports there suddenly appeared an ugly note: records of the attitude of the religious and political leaders of the Jews. As the spies of the Roman Governor brought in stories of growing hostility and bitterness, Pilate was at first no doubt amused but then alarmed. One day this was going to head up into a political crisis of the greatest magnitude, and the issue would inevitably be in his hands.

Yes, it was not the first time that Jesus Christ had crossed his path. The reports of the person of Jesus Christ were familiar ground to him, just as they are to you and to me. For there is not much about the person of Jesus Christ that you and I don't know. The work of the Sunday School was well and faithfully done, and then that of the Bible Class which followed led us to some comprehension and some familiarity with the New Testament story. Maybe the Sunday services, occasional or frequent, added to the story we heard. And then there were the radio broadcasts which were so convenient on a wet day. We listened to those, and all have spoken to us of the person of Jesus Christ, and it may well be that there's little about Him that you don't know. Like Pilate of long ago, when you come to face the person of the Master you are on familiar ground.

But now this was different, for think just a moment of *the reality of the Presence of the Christ he now faced*. For Pilate the Roman Governor was now dealing not with a report but with a person. The living Christ was there in front of him, standing before him, and to his dying day Pilate would never forget that hour when he faced the living Christ. "They led him to Pilate."

I wonder whose were the hands that held the cords that bound the Saviour and so led Him, until He stood in front of the Roman Governor, in the quiet dignity and majesty of His person. Were those hands the hands of some unknown soldier? I wonder whose hands have brought that same Christ before you in an hour that you can still remember, and that you will never forget. Were they the hands of your Sunday School teacher that brought Christ before you? It may have been the hands of some little child, it may have been the hands of some great preacher in some great cathedral, or in your church, or in part of your own home as you listened over the radio, but some time somewhere you met

Jesus Christ. You came face to face with Him, not just as a person you had read about, but as a person you now saw, and the Presence of Jesus Christ was as real to you at that moment as it was to Pontius Pilate that day so long ago! Or it may be that if hands have never yet led Christ to you, that hour is come today. And that the hands bringing Christ to you are my hands and that for you, as for Pilate, that hour, this hour, has not been unexpected. You have known so long that somehow, some day, you and the Christ must meet, even as Pilate knew. The intrusion of Christ that was expected. May I ask you, has Christ intruded thus into your life? And has His intrusion not been unexpected by you? If that is so, then note, secondly, *the inaction concerning Jesus Christ that was impossible*. "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?"

One fact in the situation that was clear to the mind of Pilate was that he must do something. What shall I do? Inaction was impossible. I want you to think of *the pressures upon the man* that compelled decision. The pressure on the one hand of the majority, of the rulers, of the scribes and Pharisees who wanted Jesus Christ eliminated. Jesus Christ had offended their pride and both He and they knew it. "If I had not come . . . they had not had sin, but now they have no cloak for their sin."

The superficiality of their religion had been ruthlessly exposed. The utter spiritual bankruptcy that lay behind the outward show and parade, behind the profession and position, all this had been revealed, and their pride hated it. He had endangered their pockets too. In John 11: 48 we read what they said about this: "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation."

Away with this disturbing, this dangerous man, away with him, eliminate him, get rid of him! Religion is all right and

we are religious, but this personal demand, this high standard, this divine intolerance—we don't want this.

Yes, the pressure of the majority urged that Christ should be eliminated. But there was also the pressure of the minority; unexpectedly the wife of Pontius Pilate pleaded that Christ should be vindicated. Had she heard something of what was afoot, of what the hatred of men would do to the Master she had come to love? It may be that night she had not been able to sleep, and as she tossed restlessly wondering what these strange reports might mean, had she risen early only to find that what she had feared had happened? The situation was desperate, and so the message was sent, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man". That was the vindication that Pilate's wife desired. She recognized the righteousness of the Master; to her He was that just man. And so it was that Pilate looked upon the Christ, on the one hand the majority urging that He should be eliminated, on the other hand the minority urging that He should be vindicated as "that just man".

And as Pilate looked, the conscience of the Roman Governor was stirred to action, and his conscience gave judgment. The minority was right; He was indeed a just man.

But if we have considered the pressures upon the man Pilate, note also *the predicament of the man*. For Pilate found himself wanting in his heart to do the right thing, but at the same time afraid to do it because of what might happen if he did. But one thing he did know: he must do something. Is that not a predicament that you and I have known? Have we not known the same pressures, the pressures of the majority and of the minority in our heart and conscience? We have known that Jesus Christ has been even more than "that just man". We have faced in Him the claims of one whom our hearts testified to be the Son of God, and the Saviour of the world. And we too have wanted to do the

right thing by Jesus Christ but have found it difficult, for it has been a minority vote in His favour, and the big majority vote has been urging that His claims, that His person, should be eliminated.

What would happen if we did what we wanted to do; what would people say? Is there not here so much that you and I have in common with Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, in that we too have discovered that inaction has been impossible? I wonder whether what Pilate did is what you have been doing. For I read thirdly here, of *the evasion of Jesus Christ that was attempted*. We find that Pontius Pilate, recognizing that something had to be done about Christ, tried to shift the responsibility for dealing with the problem on to other shoulders. Note *the alternative he tried*. First, by sending Jesus to Herod. We read of this in Luke 23, verse 7. And Pontius Pilate felt happy to think, as he saw the Saviour depart, that something was being done about Him, and that this issue was being shouldered by another.

We read, "he sent him to Herod." Thus the man who shirked the issue himself hoped that somebody else would do the thing he hadn't got the courage to do. Is there anything here that we have in common with Pilate? I think there is. For I have met men who have shelved this whole issue themselves and left it, it may be, to their wives. Oh yes, they're glad the missus goes to church, but church-going is not for them, and so while the wife sets out for church with the children, they stretch out their great big lazy legs before the fire, and reach out a hand for the Sunday paper. I have met parents who have shirked this issue, and left it to their children. Oh yes, of course they believe in the Church, they've had their children baptized, and they see that their children go to Sunday School. They wouldn't have it any other way, but they themselves do nothing about Christ; they leave it to their children. And what they themselves have not the

courage to do, deep down in their hearts they hope that their children will do.

I have met so-called church members who have left the issue to the minister. Oh, that's not my job, they say; that's the parson's job. And so the issue of a personal response to the claims of Jesus Christ, a personal loyalty to Him that covers every department of life, this is shelved, and shirked. And an evasion of Jesus Christ is attempted.

I wonder if someone like this is reading these words. Perhaps you have been shirking the issue, leaving it to somebody else; but as with Pilate, so with you the attempt at evasion will fail, for we read "Herod sent him again to Pilate". The question was one that Pilate just couldn't get rid of. "What shall I do with Jesus?"

It was in his power to do the right thing by Jesus Christ, as it is in your power. The alternative having failed, Herod not being willing to handle the responsibility, Pilate then tried to throw the responsibility on to the people. And so after the alternative was tried and had failed we find that *an appeal was made*. It was his custom to release at the feast a prisoner, and the choice this year would be between two, between Barabbas, who was a murderer, and the matchless Christ.

This was the way out. Let's leave it to the people, let them decide, and the choice is such an obvious one. As Pilate thought of the choice he offered between Barabbas, a murderer, and the Master, why logic, justice, common sense, demanded that the verdict must be for Jesus Christ. But it wasn't, for there is nothing so illogical, so unfair, so unwise as sin. And the appeal that he made failed too, and the forces that he would not alienate would not alter, and the decision came back to him yet again, "What shall I do with Jesus Christ?"

We do well to realize that in reaching our decision it is

both futile to try and shift the responsibility on to other shoulders, and also to appeal to the logic and fairness of the world. The world today, as in Christ's day, hates the Master and won't respond to logic. And so the drama moves to its end.

We have considered the intrusion that was expected, the inaction that was impossible, the evasion that was attempted, and now we have to consider *the rejection of Jesus Christ that was incredible*. Consider first, *the fear that chained him*.

The rejection that was incredible, for Pilate had examined the evidence and reached his verdict: "I find no fault with this man." And that same man heard himself almost minutes later giving sentence that Jesus should be crucified. Why this unbelievable cowardly act? The text of the narrative gives us the answer. For here we read of "Pilate willing to content the people". "Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required." "The voices of these and of the Chief Priests prevailed." "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend."

So the threats and the shouts of the majority won the day, and so Pilate failed to do the right thing by Jesus Christ at the hour of his soul's destiny, and he failed because he was a coward.

I wonder whether that is at heart our problem. We read in the old book of Wisdom: "The fear of man bringeth a snare." How many people there are chained literally by their fear of what others would say. Fear of what Jesus Christ would demand, but fear above everything else of the face of man. And while their conscience dictates one thing as the right thing, the only thing, to do with Jesus Christ, their cowardice directs their actions into a rejection of Him.

Pilate has nearly finished with Jesus Christ now, but one thing remains. "When Pilate saw that he could prevail

nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person'."

We have considered the fear that chained him, and here we witness *the farce that condemned him*. "I am innocent." Pilate, keep your hands in that water a minute; what do you mean? "I am innocent." Do you admit then that you have been on trial, and not the Christ, that you are the prisoner and Christ the Judge; is that why you plead your innocence? If so, take your hands out of the water, man, for no water on earth could wash away the stains of your guilt, your cowardly guilt; no water could, but only blood, the blood you helped to shed: "the blood of Christ" which "cleanseth from all sin".

Am I speaking to someone, and you have not done the right thing by Jesus Christ? Then I ask you in what basin are you trying to wash your guilty hands? In the water of the imperfections of the Church, of the inconsistencies of some professing Christian? Take your hands out of the water for a moment and answer this question. What have you done with Jesus the Son of God who loves you, the Lamb of God who bore away your sins, the Risen Lord of Life who confronts you today; have you done the right thing by Him? Have you acknowledged Him as your Saviour, have you admitted Him into your heart as your life, have you acclaimed Him as your Lord, have you done the right thing by Jesus Christ? If you haven't, then will you face up to this, the most important question in the world: What will you do with Jesus which is called Christ?

Note that the question is not what will you do with the Church, what will you do with the Bible, what will you do with the Christian creeds, but what will you do with Jesus Christ, the Living Lord, the Son of God, who faces you this day?

There's an old-fashioned hymn that has put this into words that I can never forget, and it goes like this:

“Jesus is standing in Pilate's hall
 Friendless, forsaken, despised by all.
 Hearken, what meaneth this sudden call:
 What will you do with Jesus?
 What will you do with Jesus?
 Neutral you cannot be!
 Some day your heart will be asking
 What will He do with me?”

And there it is then, the most important question in the world, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” What will *you* do with Jesus? Something you must do; you must accept Him, or reject Him. One thing is impossible and that is inaction. Make your choice, give your verdict, take your stand now.

"He was angry, and would not go in."

Luke 15: 28

4

A SOUL WITH A GRIEVANCE

THERE is one part of the parables of our Lord which suffers through neglect, and that is the second part of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

For so many of us the very title of the parable puts the emphasis in our minds on the younger son, and in our interpretation of the parable our thinking more often ceases with the words "He was lost and is found".

But the story of the elder brother is one full of suggestive teaching for Christians, teaching which uncovers the real character and nature of the sin of self-pity, and so I want to consider the closing verses of this parable with you under the title "A Soul with a Grievance".

This title brings the whole of this section of the parable vividly alive and makes it relevant to our own Christian experience. For I am sure that all of us are familiar with the spirit of grievance and the sin of self-pity. It may be that the grievance is nourished by one Christian against another Christian in our group or fellowship, or church, or it may be that the grievance is one nourished against a minister. How frequently one comes across this! Or it may be that the grievance that is nourished by the soul is a grievance against God Himself.

Whatever the grievance may be, the Christian who indulges in it is very often found drowned in self-pity like the elder brother in the parable before us.

The second part of this parable, known to us as the parable of the Prodigal Son, falls into two parts: the first gives us the circumstances that provoked the situation, and the second reveals the character of the man. It is to this second part that we now turn.

Let us read, then, from verse 28:

“And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”

Let us consider these final verses and see in them first of all THE CURSE OF SELF-PITY. I have deliberately entitled it the curse of self-pity because it is such a destructive thing. Note, first of all, (a) *how it destroys our happiness*. “He was angry”, and the anger of this man was surely a sullen and sulky anger.

Gone was the smile, gone was the content, the serenity that should have marked his face and mind. Tell me this, if you have ever met a soul with a grievance, has this not been true—that they have lost their joy, their radiance of spirit, their serenity of mind? It has been destroyed, their joy in the Lord has gone, their joy in the fellowship of His people, in the study of His word; and how dishonouring all that is.

A grumpy Christian, a sullen Christian, is no commenda-

tion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. St. Paul says in Galatians 5: 22 that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy . . ." and one of the evidences of a life truly filled with the Holy Spirit of God is this joyousness. Not that we are to live in what Dr. Paul Rees has called "a bubble-bath of perpetual emotion" but that the Christian is meant to know a deep current of serenity and content within the soul; but a grievance that is nourished can kill that.

Too often one has met Christians and the smile has gone from their lips, the spring has gone out of their step, and all because they have got a grievance against someone. Indeed it is hardly possible to preach to any congregation of God's people without having at least one member of that congregation indulging in this mood of self-pity, one life in which the happiness has all gone, one spirit that is sullen, angry and sulky; and so the curse of self-pity is seen in the way that it destroys our happiness.

But note also (b) *it destroys our usefulness*. He was "angry and would not go in". What a lot there was to be done in that household that day. The whole place was teeming with activity and rejoicing in it. The servants were hurrying here and there attending to the many tasks. The father with a smile on his face moved contentedly amongst them, all delighting in the busy activity which marked the occasion. But there was one person that day doing nothing, and that was the elder brother, who was nursing his grievance, doing nothing but sulk and scowl and grouse.

How many Christians there are who are to be found in this condition doing little or nothing in their church fellowship. They are standing aloof from all the busyness and happiness of the work of God, waiting, waiting for someone to come and invite them to come in. Waiting for somebody to come and fuss over them, to smooth down their ruffled feathers, waiting for somebody to apologize it may be.

How many Christians there are like this, difficult people, touchy and awkward. They are so quick to take offence, and there they are standing outside the happy, busy fellowship of the people of God, looking on at the busyness of God's people.

Their usefulness has gone, and surely the Christian is meant to be useful, to serve a constructive and valuable purpose. We must all surely know the parable told by our Lord in St. Luke's Gospel, chapter 13: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none; cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?"

The fig tree was there to be useful, to be productive, and it was failing in the real purpose of its existence; in the words of the parable it was "cumbering the ground". Or in other words it was getting in the way.

It is only too possible for Christians to be just that in the life of their church. They simply get in the way of other people, they take up their time and waste it in argument, in pleading, in reasoning, and all the time they are doing nothing, and for what reason? Simply because they have a grievance against somebody, against something. Because they have allowed this grievance to remain in their minds and hearts, because they have nursed it and nourished it with self-pity, not only has their happiness gone, but their usefulness has gone too.

The curse of self-pity is also seen in the fact that (c) *it destroys our one-ness*, or our fellowship. "He was angry and *would not go in.*" How deep the break in fellowship was shown in the words of the elder brother when speaking to his father; he speaks of "This thy son". No longer of "This my brother". And so "He would not go in".

I wonder how many Christian people there are who have pulled out from the real and vital fellowship of the family of God because of some grievance. They too "will not go in". They have stopped going to the prayer meeting now. They used to go every week and how they loved it, and their contribution in prayer and fellowship was a real one that was valued highly by their minister. He used to count on them and felt that he could always rely upon them to be there and to get under the burden of the need and responsibility of the work of the church. But that has stopped long ago. They don't come now, not since that happened. Or it may be that they used to teach in Sunday School, or stand at the open-air service and share in that witness to Christ's Name in the parish, or it may be that they used to go to the Christian Union meetings in college or hospital until that happened. But now their fellowship is destroyed, their sense of one-ness with other Christians and their Christian life is now lived in isolation.

All this is so contrary to the whole atmosphere of the teaching of the New Testament and contrary to the injunction there that we should not "forsake an assembling of ourselves together". These Christians ignore the fellowship of the spirit and now they will not go in, but there they stand aloof, their happiness has been destroyed, their usefulness has gone, their one-ness and fellowship with other believers just a memory.

Oh the curse of self-pity, and how tragically common it is!

Let us turn to the next verse, verse 29, for it, too, sparkles with truth. If in the previous verse we have found the curse of self-pity, in verse 29 we have THE CAUSE OF SELF-PITY. Words are revealing things, for what is in the heart usually comes out of the mouth, and here in these words the elder brother is speaking. As we listen to his words let us look

through them into his heart, and see if we can find something to learn about the cause of self-pity in this soul with a grievance.

The first thing that we can see here is (a) *his restricted vision*. The significant words are surely these: "I . . . Me . . . My . . ." and they occur no less than five times in six lines in my Bible. "Thou never gavest *me*." Here was someone in whose vision the foreground was filled with the importance of his own self, and in life almost always the soul with a grievance is someone with a grievance about himself. Instead of a humility of heart and mind that sings, "Oh to be nothing, nothing, only to lie at His feet," there is a pride and self-assertiveness which would sing instead, "Oh to be something, something, only to stand on my feet."

Do you remember how St. Paul in Philippians 1: 27 stresses the vital urgency of maintaining a spirit of true Christian unity? "That ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel," and then gives us the secret of such unity; "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." After which he goes on to set out in matchless words the utter humility of a mind which set no limit to the amount of injury it was prepared to receive. Oh, the restricted vision of such a soul with a grievance, a vision that cannot see beyond itself!

But note also in the words of this elder brother, that we can see too (b) *his distorted values*. "Thou never gavest me a kid." Many years ago I remember hearing Dr. S. D. Gordon of America say, "You can shut out the light of the sun with a threepenny bit if you hold it close enough to your eyes", and how tragically true that is of the large proportion little things assume if we get them and hold them close enough to our eyes.

The classic illustration of this is the story of Ahab and Naboth's vineyard. Do you remember how Naboth stood

firm in front of the king's desire, answering, "I will not give thee my vineyard", whereupon the king went into the sulks. When Jezebel, his queen, found him and learned the reason for his behaviour how unconsciously revealing were her words to the sulky king: "Dost thou now *govern the Kingdom of Israel?*" (1 Kings 21: 6 and 7).

She meant by her words that he had a right as king to take what he wished, but her words contain an unconscious irony: "Dost thou now govern the Kingdom of Israel?" Why all this fuss over a vineyard when you have a whole kingdom that is yours!

How desperately easy it is for the soul with a grievance to lose all sense of proportion. What is it that we want someone to do, or someone to say, or God to do before we are prepared to come into the fellowship of the Church? If only we can take this grievance of ours right out into the open, how small it is in comparison with the whole wide range of Christian living! How insignificant it is compared with the possibilities of our obedience to God's Will! This man wanted a kid; what do you and I want before we are prepared to behave ourselves like grown-up mature Christians, instead of spiritual babies?

How many a man has lost years of fruitful Christian service because he was determined not to serve until he got "an apology". What distorted values we sometimes allow in our lives.

There was one other contributory factor to this mood of self-pity and that was *his outraged virtue*. "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment."

Here we find a man thinking in terms of what he deserved: his long record of faithfulness and obedience to his father. It is always dangerous in spiritual things when we start thinking thus, when we move off the ground of grace, that word

that covers our whole relationship with God; having been saved by grace we must stand in grace, for nowhere and at no time is our relationship with God based upon merit. We deserve nothing from God, and have no right ever to claim anything, and even from man do we deserve more than our Lord received? and what did He receive? Rejection and unfaithfulness, not only from His enemies but from His friends, and He, Himself, told His own, "It is enough that the servant be as his lord."

Yes, the soul with a grievance has forgotten that in the realm of spiritual things never can we press any claim upon God for anything on the grounds of our righteousness, our faithfulness, our service, for when in our doing we have done all that we could, we are but unprofitable servants.

And so in the words of this man we can find the threefold cause of self-pity. His restricted vision, his distorted values, and his outraged virtue.

The final verses of the chapter give us THE CURE FOR SELF-PITY. We turn from the words of the elder brother to the words of his father. Words that sparkle like the many facets of a diamond, and in the language of the father, which is in some measure the language of rebuke, the father reminds his disgruntled son of three things that he has promised. Three things that every soul with a grievance would do well to recall. The first was (a) *the Father's abiding presence*. "Son, thou art ever with me." How desperately possible it is for the soul with a grievance to forget the abiding presence of the Father. It is much easier to take the grievance and shut oneself in with it; or it may be to take the grievance and talk it over with friends, who will say the kind of things we want them to say. How much harder to take the grievance and bring it before the Lord.

Can we really look up into the face of our Crucified Redeemer and say "I am not coming back until they have

apologized"? Men never apologized to Christ and still He went on loving them. And we do well, when facing events that could give rise to a spirit of grievance and of self-pity, to remember the Father's abiding presence and to learn that even in this we can have fellowship with Him.

And then the father also reminded the son of something else he had forgotten, and that was, secondly, (b) *the Father's abundant provision*. "All that I have is thine." Reminding him of all that he had and saying, don't get upset about this tiny little thing that you haven't got. You haven't got a kid, it may be, but you have got infinitely more than that. How well we do if we remind ourselves of the things we have in Christ and stop complaining about the little things that we may not have. What a vast realm is ours into which we may enter of the Will of God, that a widening and deepening experience of His grace and power will hold for us! Why do we wait then for some trivial little apology from some insignificant Christian when all the time the omnipotent God is waiting to lead us out into the fullness of His purpose?

Some years ago I remember hearing about a lady who went to see her doctor, to seek his counsel because her health was not good. After he had heard her talk for some time, he said to her, "You want to travel, you want to get out into the world to see some of the really big things, and then all these petty little things that worry you will take their right place and assume an insignificance they deserve."

What a realm of vastness the Christian can enter into if he so desires. Remember the abundant provision and don't sulk and grouse about some petty triviality.

There was just one other thing that the son had forgotten, and about which the father reminded him, and that was, thirdly, (c) *the Father's achieved purpose*. "This thy brother is found."

For how long had the father's heart been set upon the finding of the lost son! Every day he had gazed out along the road to see whether or not his son was returning. The whole house had been shadowed with a sense of the father's distress, and now at long last the prayer of many years, the purpose of an unfaltering love, had been achieved.

Surely this was a cause for rejoicing indeed, and not the time to quibble about petty things. And so it is in the work of the Church: the heart of God is set upon the seeking and the saving of those that are lost. It matters not really who does the work, or who receives the praise, or who receives the thanks. The main thing in the fellowship of any Church is that the purpose in the heart of God should be achieved.

Besides this nothing else counts. And so for us who find ourselves in the family of God and in the fellowship of the Church, let our hearts beat in tune with the heart of the Father, and when we see His purpose being achieved, and His heart rejoicing, let our hearts rejoice too.

To get in a temper and sulk about a kid at such a time is folly indeed. A soul with a grievance, and that soul found within the circle of the family, drenched in self-pity, demonstrating the curse of it and the cause of it—and we hope, whether or not it happened in the parable, it may at least happen in our experience that we shall find the cure of it.

5

A TRAGIC POSSIBILITY

"AND supper being ended . . . Jesus . . . laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.

"Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit."—John 13: 2-10.

Here I want us to be concerned with the way of cleansing and enablement which we find in Christ, and which is ours by virtue of our union with Him. But I do not think it is much good considering the way of cleansing until we are quite certain that we are *willing* for it. So I want to seek by God's grace that you and I may ascertain together whether we are really willing. May I, then, share with you three simple thoughts which God has laid on my heart arising out of the incident recorded in John 13.

As so often in the gospel story, the interest of a scene which begins in a crowd suddenly narrows and is focused upon an individual. I suspect that your experience has been very similar during the preaching of the word. Your first impression in a church or convention may have been of a vast throng of people: but as you have sat listening to God's word, has it not seemed to you as if the throng has disappeared, and the light of God's presence and truth has narrowed in focus upon yourself, till sometimes as you have sat listening you might have thought that there was nobody else there at all except you—and the Master? In this story the light focused suddenly upon Simon Peter and picked him out; and as we look together at him it may well be that some of us may see something of our own hearts.

The first thing to note about Simon Peter is, that he was *a man with defiled feet*. And the action of Jesus Christ, and His words, would indicate that the dust of the highway which had defiled the feet of Simon Peter that day was symbolical of an inner defilement of heart and soul.

Will you note first of all *the nature* of this man who was defiled? He was a man of *privilege*. Peter was no ordinary disciple. For days, for months, for years, he had accompanied his Master; he had heard His words and witnessed His power and seen something of His glory—just as so many of us can look down the years and down the way by which God has led us right up to this very hour; and you and I can see that we too have been privileged by the goodness and mercy which have followed us all the days of our life, not only since our conversion but even before it. We, too, are men and women of privilege.

But Peter was more than that: he was also a man of *prominence*. Peter was a leader. Other disciples remained unnoticed and unknown, but Peter was prominent and conspicuous in the company of those who followed Christ. Have

some of us felt that in some small measure we share this in common with Simon Peter? Are you a leader in the Christian circle in which you work; are you a fairly prominent member in your church? It may be that you are an office-bearer, an elder, a deacon, or a member of the church council. It may be that you are a Sunday School teacher, a Crusader class leader. It may be that you are a missionary, or a minister. Whatever you are, you share with Peter some degree of prominence in the company of those who follow the Master. You are not only a person of privilege but also of prominence, and thus share something in common with the nature of Simon Peter.

What of his *need*? This man was defiled, that was his need. I wonder how many of us who share the nature of Simon Peter share his need? The defilement of Simon Peter was a defilement which he shared at that moment with the other disciples—the defilement in our lives may vary with our individual personalities, but will be one of which, none the less, we are as vividly conscious as were the disciples that night. The pride of the disciples had been touched—the question in their minds was which of them should be the greatest.

I wonder how deeply you have known some message to probe down to the very root of the defilement of your life even as I have known it in mine? I wonder how many of us have left a church service or a meeting shocked and startled at the discovery of some trait of sin permeating almost every relationship of life, a sin of whose existence we had scarcely been aware, possibly the sin of the disciples—the sin of pride. Henry Drummond used to say something extraordinarily significant: he said, in effect, that the sins that the world can see to be sins are not the most important sins just because the world can see them. I think some of us are far too much taken up with sins that the world sees, instead of those that God sees.

Defiled! Proud! Do you remember the words of St. John

concerning his Lord, words which men ought to be able to say of us who claim to represent that Lord—"We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Grace and truth! Are you concerned passionately with the proclamation of the truth of God's word? Have you considered that the world takes not so much notice of the truth of your words as of the tone of your voice? I have felt very much in my own heart that God has had to deal with me along this very line. I have preached the word for quite a time now, but as I look back I sometimes wonder if Christ would ever have spoken to men as I have spoken. Not that there has necessarily been anything lacking in the truth of the message. But the word will never get as far as the hearts of men if people are put off by the tone of your voice. Grace and truth! Do you profess a concern for the needs of others, and yet in your own mind you are constantly critical of them? May I suggest that your outward concern will not cut any ice with men in the light of your obvious criticism of them. Grace and truth! I do not think that we can say that the breakdown in spiritual work among Evangelicals is due solely to the lack of knowledge of Christian doctrine. In many cases it may be so; and I know that ignorance is one of the greatest sins of the Church. Nor do I think we can say that it is entirely due to the presence of gross sin or immorality in the Church, although in some cases even that is true. I want to suggest to you that the breakdown seems to lie far more often than we like to think in the realm of the relationship of the heart of the Christian both to other Christians and to the world.

I would suggest to you that, from the spiritual point of view, the greatest dearth in the Church today is a lack of grace, which from the worldly point of view may be regarded as a lack of evidence. May I suggest to you that until people see the grace, they will not listen to the truth? When John

looked back on the witness of Jesus Christ he said, "That which we have seen and heard . . ." You and I so often expect people just to listen to a message, while all the time, permeating our thinking of others, permeating even our relationship with God, damaging your witness and mine, there has been defilement, this sin of pride.

Peter was a man with defiled feet, but he was more: he was *a man with a defiant heart*. Christ had moved round that upper room in a silence that could be felt. Men were looking away from each other, not daring to meet each other's eyes. Then the silence was broken; a voice sharp with suppressed emotion, harsh under an almost intolerable strain of intense feeling, spoke. It was Simon Peter's voice; and with the hurt of his heart in the sound of his voice, incredulously he spoke. "Not my feet!" Then came the quiet, unhurried tones of the Master's voice: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." Then a sharp, almost explosive, word: "Never! Never!"

Do you know anything of *the refusal that Peter made*? I know that the motive behind Peter's refusal, and the motive behind yours and mine, may be totally different; but the issue is the same. "My feet? Thou shalt never wash my feet." Have you been saying the same thing to Christ concerning your life and His will? "Never!" Like Peter you have known what it is to be nearer almost to anger in your refusal than to any other emotion. How many of us have felt the tide of anger and resentment rising until we could have walked out—resentment against the speaker, anger with God, resentment against the person who persuaded us to come where we would listen to God's word; and like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, we have heard the sound of music and dancing, we have seen the faces of those enjoying the feast, but we have been angry and "would not go in".

Do you, as you listen, know that you are defiled? You are defiled, are you not; and you are defiant, too, to the very depths of your soul. Your attitude to the Master who would cleanse you is this—"Never! Never! Not my feet; not Thou." Listen; if you echo the refusal that Peter made, you must run *the risk that Peter ran*.

Listen quietly with me. Christ is speaking, and I think He spoke quietly, don't you? "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." Of course you are a Christian, and you will still be a Christian if you maintain your refusal. Of course you are a worker for God, and you will still be a worker. But I suggest to you—and it may be that this is God's word to some hearts at this moment—you may find that you have no part with Christ. I think the tragedy of the Church of Jesus Christ today is that great company of converted Christian men and women who have no part with Christ. The tide of Christ's work flows strongly and quietly on, but they are to be found in some stagnant backwater of almost forgotten experience, having no part with the living Christ in His work! The vital issue for you today is not whether you are an Evangelical Christian, or whether you are a staunch Protestant in your churchmanship, or whether you are keen for souls in God's work, or whether you delight to stand in the open air and give your testimony. The vital issue for you and for me is, what part have we with Christ? You see, if we have no part with Christ, then everything else is of no value. It does not matter how orthodox you are, or Protestant, or keen, or if you stand in the open air and speak: it all goes for nothing unless Christ is with you. I want to ask you now—what part have you with Christ?

I wish I could paint the scene. That word "Never!" is still echoing faintly round the room. The figure of Peter is tense, the face is flushed, the eyes stormy, and the hands clenched. The kneeling figure of Christ has stilled. He had been busy,

but now with that word "Never!" He has stopped and is quiet. His face is upturned; He had been looking at Peter's feet, but now He is looking into his face, and the eyes, the quiet untroubled eyes of the Master, gaze into the soul of Peter. Then He speaks: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me."

Angry, resentful, guilty Christian, it is Christ you have to deal with! He knows, with you, the nature of your defilement. And the quarrel and the argument which are raging in your soul even now are not with the views of any speaker: your argument is with Christ—"If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me."

Defiled, defiant! can you come with me to the last step? Peter was a man of defiled feet, a man with a defiant heart, but he became *a man with a desperate cry*. "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." When Peter heard the Master, it was *a truth that was unbearable*. "No part with me"? That just broke Peter—to have no part with his Lord—when he had had such a part; to be shut out while others were shut in; to know nothing of the unfolding of the heart of Christ, as he had known it in the days of the past; to have no part with Christ, to look down the future days and months and years, and to have no part with Christ in His work and in the fellowship of His Spirit; to have no part with Christ—he just could not stand the thought of it, and it broke him!

Can you stand the thought of the future, having no part with Christ in fellowship with Him in that quiet, deep, strong, eternal work of redemption? "No part" with Christ? Can you bear the thought? If you can, I question whether you are a Christian at all. If you cannot bear it, then may God make that truth break your pride now; because if Christ does not cleanse us from this evil thing, if we maintain our refusal, He will maintain His rejection—not so far as salvation

is concerned; that is settled, we have been bathed; but as far as fellowship and usefulness are concerned, we shall find that we have "no part with Him". As you go on in the coming days, is the record of these coming weeks and months to be—no part with Him? I know you will be busy, you may be very complacent, you may feel very important, you may maintain your part; but, as far as Christ is concerned you will have "no part" with Him. "No part with Me."

Moreover, it will mean having no part with His people. Some of you have had a taste of that already during your Christian experience. It may be that you were in a church fellowship or Christian house-party, and everybody else seemed to have a quality of common interest and a depth of friendship such as you knew nothing of; and you felt out of it. You had and still have no part with them. Do you know why? Because you have no part with Christ; you are shut out, aren't you? Yet Christ wants to bring you in.

It was a truth which was intolerable, and Peter could not stand it; so that his defiance broke, and instead that desperate cry went out, and Peter offered to Christ *a trust that was unreserved*; and, as so often happens, he was much harder on himself than Christ was. You know, we are sometimes like that: but there is no virtue in being harder on yourself than Christ is. Peter cried out, "Lord, not my feet only, but my hands and my head"—every bit of me, Lord. Peter just gave everything, as the Master knelt in humility at his feet. We often talk about kneeling at Christ's feet, and that is quite true; but I do not think that is the complete picture. He will, and does, ask us to kneel at His feet, but the almost unbelievable thing is that He is kneeling at our feet, saying, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." On that occasion he took a towel. He took much more to cleanse us; He humbled Himself and took upon Himself the form of a servant, He became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; to cleanse

you and to cleanse me from pride and sin, He did not take a towel, He took a Cross!

We shall gather round Him in the closing minutes, at the Cross. Christ is at your feet; oh, unbelievable grace! You are defiled, defiant, and now, it may be, in the mercy of God, desperate.

"A garden enclosed."

Song of Solomon 4:12

6

"A WALLED GARDEN"

TUCKED away in that strange and little-read book, the Song of Solomon, is a most suggestive phrase, descriptive of the Christian life. It is a book in which the love between the bride and bridegroom has been set forth with rare delicacy and tenderness, and saints down the ages have seen in this a reflection of the relationship between Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, and His Bride, the Church.

In chapter 4, v. 12, the bridegroom speaks of the bride as being "a garden enclosed". In our more modern speech we would, I think, translate the phrase by "a walled garden". Here we have a most suggestive and lovely description of the Christian life. All of us must have known what it is to walk along some road bordered, it may be, by a high wall or a thick, impenetrable hedge, and then we have come to a gate where we have been able to catch a glimpse of the garden which the hedge has concealed; just the beginning of the stretch of smooth, green lawn, the beginning of the herbaceous border, with its promise of a galaxy of colour and profusion of bloom beyond. We have seen, it may be, the high up-reaching branch of some tree, laden with fruit, with the promise of much more fruit beyond that we could not see. It has been a glimpse only, but enough to make us wish we

could see more, and to envy those free to enjoy all the loveliness and fruitfulness of such a place.

A garden enclosed—a walled garden—such is the picture of the Christian life suggested here in our text. Keeping the illustration in mind, and recognizing that the relationship underlying it is the relationship of love, may I share with you these three thoughts arising out of our text?

The words suggest first of all

THE PRIVACY FROM OBSERVATION THAT LOVE CAN
ENJOY IN SUCH A GARDEN

A walled garden; I may be able to glimpse just a tiny part of such a garden as I pass by along the road, but the greater part of the garden by far is hidden from my sight. This suggests to me

(1) *A Truth Concerning the Inwardness of the Christian Experience.* It is more than tragic that there are so many who have not yet grasped the fact that the essence of the Christian experience is the unseen, indwelling presence of Christ in the soul; that just as the gardener moves about such a garden, unseen and unobserved, so Christ indwells the hearts of those whose faith has gone out to trust and receive Him as their Saviour. This is what the New Testament teaches, “The kingdom of God is within you”; “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God”; “He that hath the Son hath life”; “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me”; “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in”; “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”

It is only too tragically true that vast numbers of people still seem to think that Christianity consists in going through certain forms and ceremonies, or entering a place of worship from time to time, or observing outward rules and standards.

They have not realized the wonder and miracle of the indwelling presence of the living Christ.

But there is also here (2) *A Test Concerning the Quality of our Christian Experience*. “A walled garden”, suggesting the privacy from observation that love can enjoy. We do well to ask ourselves, where is the emphasis in our Christian experience? Is it on the outward and visible life or on the hidden and invisible? For example, is our prayer life an outward act only, performed in the corporate life and worship of the Church, or is it a ministry exercised behind the closed door? Or again, do we learn more through the outward ministry of God’s Word, through sermons in churches, or do we learn more through the hidden, unseen communion between God and our souls? One of the most gracious promises given by Jesus Christ is that in which He says, “He that loveth me . . . I will love him, and *will manifest* myself to him.” Surely one of the marks of real love is that unveiling of the intimate things of heart and soul to the one loved, a sharing of every thought. But that is something reserved for the time that is unhurried and the hour that is undisturbed. Hudson Taylor, commenting on another part of this same book, writes: “We are never content to meet a loved one in public”—we want to be alone together. How does the quality of our Christian experience meet this test? Is this picture of the walled garden a picture of our spiritual life with its stress on the privacy from observation that love can enjoy there?

The second thought which comes to my mind is this, that a walled garden speaks not only of the privacy from observation that can be enjoyed there, but also of

THE VARIETY OF OCCUPATION THAT LOVE CAN FIND
IN SUCH A GARDEN

Think (1) *How Differently Christ will Come to us*. As with

the garden, so with the Saviour; for the gardener comes, it may be, with the spade, biting deeply into the earth and turning over the soil, exposing it to the bitterness of the winter's frost, to the softening rain of the springtime, or the warming sun of the summer. So Christ will come, disturbing our lives, our ways, our relationships, and the spade of change bites deeply into the earth and turns it over. How often change bites deeply into our way of life that has seemed so set for so long; until suddenly all is different. Then the gardener will come with fresh seed, with all the promise of flower and fragrance and fruit; and Christ would also plant in our minds the truth of His Word, incorruptible seed that is destined to bring sweetness and colour and fruitfulness to lives that are drab and plain. Now the gardener comes to gather the accumulation of rubbish, of dead wood and weeds, to burn and to destroy them that the garden may be ordered and neat and attractive. There is so much rubbish that can gather in our hearts and lives, that can get in the way, that makes for ugliness and uselessness, and the Master—the Divine Gardener—would come to gather, to burn and to destroy.

Now the gardener comes with tender hand to strengthen a weak growth, binding it to a strong stake, driven firmly into the ground, and so too Christ would bind our weakness to the strength of some mature Christian, or some strong, living Church, that there our weakness may be stayed until we have strength enough to stand alone. How rich the ministry of Christian friendship and fellowship can be; how much many of us owe; how much stronger many of us have become through this strengthening companionship.

But now the gardener comes with pruning knife to cut away, and deeply the blade bites into the living tree with a cutting edge of pain and hurt, taking away the unnecessary growth in order that the life of the tree might be concentrated in the production of a more perfect bloom, a richer fruit.

And so the discipline of God cuts deeply and hurtfully into our lives, but behind the pressure of the blade is the purpose of wisdom and love. How differently, then, Christ will come to us. But note also

(2) *How Constantly Christ will Abide in us.* If you know a lovely garden, you know that someone is always working there. If you come across a Christian life fragrant with all the loveliness of Christ and rich in the fruit of the Spirit, you can be sure that the Gardener's abiding presence is the secret of it all.

Like every vicarage, mine has a big garden, but I am not a gardener by inclination. I do my gardening in fits and starts—just like some Christians treat their Christianity, reading their Bibles today and then not for several days; going to church this Sunday and letting that do for a week or two. But there is no indication that spiritual life and development are to be had that way. The whole witness of the New Testament is a witness to continuance and sustained work; “Lo, I am with you all the days”; “Be ye continually being filled with the Spirit”; “Abide in me and I in you”.

Some years ago a Christian tried to express this need in the words of a hymn; a hymn we may know or may not know. It begins like this:

“I need Thee every hour, most gracious Lord”

and those words were true, but they were not enough, and so another Christian, reading them, wrote another hymn, and this hymn begins:

“Moment by moment, I'm kept in His Love,
 Moment by moment, I've life from above;
 Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine;
 Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.”

The variety of occupation that love will find there; the privacy from observation that love can enjoy there; and one final thought suggested by our text, "a walled garden", namely:

THE HOSPITALITY TO OTHERS THAT LOVE CAN DISPENSE
IN SUCH A GARDEN

There are just two final thoughts with which I want to close. In the first place, think for a moment of (1) *The Produce of the Garden that can be Shared*. How many of us must have known what it is to be taken round a lovely garden. It may have been before having tea, and after tea our hostess has said to us, "Now, before you go home, you must have something from the garden", and so we set out a second time; this time our hostess is carrying a basket, and in her hands a pair of scissors, and flowers and fruit are gathered here and there and lavished upon us, and we go away laden with good things, our lives richer, our homes more lovely. So Christ would bring others to us, that they may see the loveliness of His handiwork in our lives, and taste of the fruit of His labours. We are familiar, are we not, as Christians with the thought of our inheritance in Christ. But we do not think so often of the opposite truth, of "His inheritance in the saints", which we read of in Ephesians 1: 18. There is nothing selfish about the Christian experience. It is not for our comfort alone, or our happiness, that He works in lives. It is that He might bring others into touch with us, that they might take away from us that colour and sweetness that they need, of flower and fruit; and yet how much unlovely and unattractive Christianity there is. We may be orthodox in our creed, regular in our attendance at church, but unlovely in our living and unfruitful in our doing.

The produce of the garden that can be shared—is your life

one to which Christ is continually bringing other lives in order that they may go away enriched by His gifts through you?

But one final word, and that is to note

(2) *The Praise of the Gardener that will be Given.* “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit”, and the final message from the garden concerns the praise of the Gardener. Whenever we see a garden that is beautiful and ordered we always wonder whose hands have done the work, and so it is that the final issue of the Christian experience is not that people should admire us but that they should acclaim Him. His is the glory, not ours; and so when He brings lonely people in order that we might love them, it is that they might know His love; when He brings the unhappy to share our joy, it is that they may know His joy; when He brings the troubled that they might sense our peace, it is that they might know His peace; when He brings the difficult that they might experience our long suffering and patience, it is that they might be assured of His patience; when He brings the hurt and the wounded that we might be gentle and kind, it is that they might know the kindness of God; when He brings those whose lives are steeped in sin alongside our goodness, it is that they might realize the goodness of God; when He brings the despairing to us that they might be strengthened by our faith, it is that they might be led to put their faith in Him; when He brings the proud so that they might see our meekness of spirit, it is that they might think of Him who was meek and lowly in heart; when He brings the wayward and undisciplined alongside our lives, controlled by His Spirit, it is in order that they too might be brought under the same direction and the same control and into the same ordered beauty; and so the walled garden will speak always the praise of the Gardener.

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

Romans 8: 37

7

"MORE THAN CONQUERORS"

THOSE of you who are familiar with some of the names of those who in past years have ministered at the Keswick Convention will know that the name of Evan H. Hopkins stands pre-eminent among them. In his book, *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life*, Evan Hopkins stresses that the difference between a convention and a conference is this: that while a conference is a time for discussion, a convention is a time for decision. I believe profoundly that there comes a time when God's great concern for a Christian is that he or she, in a moment of personal decision, should give assent to what God has had to say to them through His word. It may well be that for some reader this is the hour when God is going to call you to make as personal and as real a decision as any unconverted sinner could make in an evangelistic campaign or mission.

God seems to have laid one verse on my mind just now: a verse we know well—Romans 8: 37, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." I want, if I may, to bring my life together with yours before the challenge of these words. First of all we have here—

I. THE SPHERE OF OUR VICTORY—"In all these things".

If you look back a verse or two, you will find some of the things that Paul has in mind as having a place in that sphere; but I want to take two words only out of that little phrase of four words. Each of these words brings its own particular challenge to my own heart—“in”, and “all”. Taking that first little word “in”, we find that the sphere of our victory covers—

(i) *The Experience from which No Escape is Provided*—“in these things”—that set of circumstances from which no escape is provided. There are times when a way of escape is promised. 1 Corinthians 10: 13 tells us that “there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” But, oh, how often for us the place of defeat is that place to which we are tied by circumstances that have remained unchanged for years, and promise to remain as they are for years to come. And in those circumstances from which there seems no escape—there is the breakdown of our Christian witness and profession. There are times when we are able to get away from these circumstances, when it is easy to be keen, to be friendly, to be gracious and kindly; to read our Bibles, have our quiet time, to enjoy fellowship. If only we did not have to go back to those prison walls! For years now your prayer has been that God would let you out; but no door has opened, and no escape has been provided. The story of your Christian witness and testimony for years has been the story of one defeat after another; the name of the Lord has been dishonoured and profaned by an un-Christlike life, until the others around you are thankful to be rid of you, even if for only a short time, while they are almost dreading your return.

These circumstances may be in your home, they may be in the place where you work, the church where you are a

member, the mission station to which you return. But this place of your defeat, this place from which no escape is provided, my fellow Christian, God has included in the sphere of your victory—"In all these things". Not "out of" but "*in* all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us". Yes, the sphere of our victory includes the place from which no escape is provided.

The second thought centres around that little word "all": the sphere of our victory is—

(ii) *That Sphere in which No Exception is Permitted*—"in all". Our attitude may not be that which longs for escape, but it may be that which makes exceptions—if we were asked whether or not we were experiencing the victorious life, our reply would be, "Yes, in a measure", and if we were honest we should have to add "except for . . ." and there would be confessed a realm of defeat which has been excused and accepted for a long, long time. It may be in the realm of human relationships. We excuse ourselves in one way or another; we say it does not matter, that nobody knows; we say it is quite impossible—or we may put it, "*she* is quite impossible": but the verse we are considering says that the sphere of our victory is that realm from which no escape is provided, and in which no exception is permitted. Then this amazing verse goes on to tell us—

2. THE SCALE OF OUR VICTORY—"we are more than conquerors".

Here again I find myself challenged to the depths of my being, for here I find that the scale of our victory is one in which—

(i) *There Need be No Delay*. Paul does not say "we shall be", but "In all these things we *are* more than conquerors". Those of you who remember the early years of the last war—and it is extraordinary how soon those years slip into the remote past; some of the young folk here will not remember

them at all—will recall those dreary months and years of waiting before we were able to challenge the armed might of a victorious power. There were years of weary waiting while we gathered together the resources we needed in manpower and material, and victory seemed a long way off. It was promised by that calm, strong voice of Sir Winston Churchill that came to us over the radio in those dark days, but that was all; and our nation, left alone, beaten to the wall, defenceless, without weapons, blasted with bombs, wondered if victory would ever come. For how many of us in our Christian experience is victory only a remote prospect which it seems impossible ever to achieve? We say to ourselves, “If ever it does come, it will only be after years of toil and discipline and effort”. Victory, to us, is as tantalizing as a mirage, as unreal as a dream, and it is constantly eluding our grasp. We say to ourselves, “We shall”. But that is not what Paul says. Our victory is one in which there is to be no delay. Paul does not say, “In all these things we shall be more than conquerors”, but, “we *are*”.

The scale of the victory of the New Testament experience is one in which there need be not only no delay but also one about which—

(ii) *There is to be No Doubt.* No delay! No doubt! *We are super-conquerors!* There is no doubt about that, is there? Does that mean that the Christian is never defeated? No; but it does mean that he never need be. Does it mean that the Christian is without sin? No; but it does mean that he can be without blame and without conscious sin—we are super-conquerors! In these days when so many of us are conscious of money matters, may we transfer the metaphor from the realm of fighting to that of finance? If Paul had been talking in terms of money he would have said, “We are multi-millionaires”.

May I illustrate that very simply? I have always found it

necessary to run a car for my work; then I decided to run a family as well, and there came a day when I had to sacrifice the car for the sake of the family. Just before I left the parish where I had to sacrifice the car in order to run the family, I had a very heavy lot of work to do, and a member of the congregation in extraordinary kindness offered me her beautiful car. I thanked her warmly, as she said, "If ever you want my car, let me know." But I never let her know; it happened to be a very big car, and I was thinking in terms of the amount of petrol it would consume. I have no doubt that she wondered at my silence, and one day she said to me, "Mr. Duncan, I do want you to use my car; I want you to run it at no expense to yourself—every account is to come in to me." Well, all I can say is that for the space of a few weeks, out of all the years I have been running cars, I ran one with no anxiety! You see, I was running that car on other resources, and while they were not the resources of a multi-millionaire, they were so far removed from my resources that I had no anxiety. Before that I was afraid that if anything happened to the car, a big bill might come in that I could not meet; but if any bill came in now, it would not be a worry and anxiety for me: I was running it on different resources.

Paul says that the scale of our victory is a scale in which there need be no doubt, for we are multi-millionaires. No delay; and no doubt.

3. THE SOURCE OF OUR VICTORY—"through him that loved us".

What are the elements which underlie the victorious life? We have them here, where we read of—

(i) *A Life that is Triumphant*. "In all these things we are more than conquerors *through him that loved us*." Many years ago, when I was a young fellow in Edinburgh, a booklet fell into my hands entitled *The Life that Wins*, by Dr. Trumbull. I have forgotten almost everything in the book except

the gist of the first page which was something like this—“There is only one victorious life, and that is the life of Christ.” The words of St. Paul from Philippians 1: 21, “To me to live is Christ”, were quoted, and Dr. Trumbull said that there came in his own experience the tremendous day when he realized that for Paul the Christian life was not to serve Christ, not to try to imitate Christ, not to strive after Christ; but for him *to live was Christ*. The secret of the victorious life is, that the only victorious life that has ever been lived and ever will be lived, is the life of our risen Lord, lived out in our lives!

I wonder what is the distinctive characteristic of the resurrection life of Christ? There is one thing which I find again and again before His death and resurrection, and which I never find afterwards. Do you know what it is? Temptation! He was tempted right up to the moment of His death, but never afterwards. I would ask you to find your own answer to that question. For myself, I would hate to dogmatize, but would suggest that before our Lord passed through the experience of death into that of resurrection, Satan saw that there was a possibility in the humanity of our Lord, that he might frustrate the purposes of God; but after our Lord passed through death into resurrection life, He was beyond the reach of temptation. Was that it? If that be so, then does it mean that the resurrection life of my victorious Lord which I possess has within it this distinctive characteristic of immunity to temptation; of being dead to sin? If only I can live in the power of that life, then I shall find that I am living a life which possesses the same quality, a life of immunity, “dead to sin”. I know only too well that in my life there are two natures: the flesh remains, but alongside it is the new nature, and I must choose in which I shall walk. If I walk in the Spirit who mediates to me the resurrection life of my living victorious Lord, then I need not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.

A life that is triumphant: that is the first source of my victory. What is the second? "Through him that loved us." The other element in my victory and yours is—

(ii) *A Love that is Trustworthy*—"through him that loved us". How trustworthy is that love? Paul has just spoken of it: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" So much of our trouble lies, does it not, in the fact that we do not trust God. We will not trust His wisdom to shape our lives as His perfect wisdom sees best. We are continually arguing with Him and saying, "Lord, I do not want this in my life", but God says, "It is best for you". We will not trust Him, we will not trust His love; we think that God's will is going to be the very worst thing, the enemy of our happiness, the thing which will rob our lives of the quality of richness which we want. We will not trust Him; we want our circumstances to be changed, we want God to do something for us which He is not prepared to do, that He will not do.

"Through him that loved us." Possibly one of the most difficult lessons to learn in Christian living is that God's love is trustworthy. The circumstances of your life and mine are the very best for us. Do you find that difficult to believe? Is there someone here who would give almost all he or she has if the path of life could be changed, who has learned to kneel in the loneliness of the night and cry out in their own garden of Gethsemane, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me", and your sweat too has been as it were great drops of blood, when you cried in your agony of heart and mind to God? You may have cried like that to God for years, and the answer has come back, "No, my child, it cannot pass." But through Him that loved us there is a life for you which is triumphant, and a love which is trustworthy.

Perhaps you know the story of the little chap who went to

bed and for some reason or another—I think the mother was away—he was sharing a room with his father. When his father got into bed the little fellow called out in the dark, “Daddy, can I sing?” The father gave consent, but the singing was of such a nature that it precluded sleep; so after a while the father said, “Son, I think you had better stop”, and silence fell in the darkness of that room. After a little while the little chap in a strange room, in the darkness, said, “Daddy, is your face turned this way?”

I wonder if there is some reader in the dark? God’s love is trustworthy, the secret and the source of victory. “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” What a victory, my dear fellow-Christians, your victory and mine.

“ . . . Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet,
and heard his word.”

Luke 10: 39

8

AT HIS FEET

ONE of the most suggestive forms of Bible study is the study of the characters we find within its pages, and in the New Testament one of the most attractive of these is the character of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whose home at Bethany was so often the home of the Master. In the gospel story we find an interesting fact about Mary, namely that while she is mentioned unmistakably only three times, yet on each of these occasions she is found in the same place—at the feet of Jesus. The circumstances surrounding these occasions are varied, and each throws its own light upon the character of Mary who so undeniably and so unselfishly loved her Lord. It might be helpful for us, who profess to love Him too, to bring our own professed love into the light that shines from Mary’s love in order that we may learn some of the lessons that Mary’s love for Christ can teach us.

The first reference we have to Mary is in the familiar passage in St. Luke’s gospel, where we read of Mary who “also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word”. The first lesson that I would learn with you is this, that

I. THE PLACE OF LOVE IS FOUND AT THE FEET OF JESUS

Note that this was

- (i) *The Place she Loved.* “Who sat at Jesus’ feet.” Love

always wants to be near the one loved. Love is never content to remain at a distance. In the life-story of Amy Carmichael we read of a charming incident when Miss Carmichael looked up to see a child standing near her. She stretched out a welcoming hand, which the child took, saying, "I have come." Miss Carmichael asked, "For what?" thinking the child might have some trouble she was bringing to her. But the reply was not the expected one—"Just to love you," said the child. Is it not true that love always wants to be near the one loved and to linger there?

The Rev. G. R. Harding Wood tells of an incident that came within his experience of a child and her mother who went into a church to pray. The child went to the Children's Corner to say her prayers, while the mother knelt in the church. Mother's prayers were ended, but her daughter's were not. When at last her little girlie came to her, the mother said to her, "Well, you were a long time saying your prayers. What were you doing?" To which her daughter replied, "Well, Mummy, I just knelt down and said, 'Dear Jesus', and He said, 'Dear Barbara', and then we just loved one another."

And so, while Martha was busy going in and out, preparing the meal, Mary was content to be near her Lord. Here at once is a test to apply to our own professed love for Christ. Are we found at His feet? We who take our love so much for granted would do well to ask ourselves, "Is this the place we love?" It was the place that Mary loved—to be at Jesus' feet.

But note also secondly, this was

(ii) *The Voice she Loved.* "Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word." "And heard his word." To listen and to learn from the Master was her supreme delight. To hear His voice meant everything to Mary. How much some voices mean to us! It may be the voice of some servant of God who has been greatly used as a means of grace to our

own souls. We owe them such a debt, and we bear them such love in Christ that the very sound of their voice is music to our ears. I can think of one such voice that I heard first in the tent at Keswick, a voice that, though I seldom hear it now, is music in my ears. Is that not why letters from home and from loved ones mean so much, because as we read the written words we hear the speaking voice? But does God's voice mean as much to us as that? When the time comes for us to make our way to His feet, do we go with dragging feet and reluctant hearts, or do we go eagerly and expectantly because the place of love is found at the feet of Jesus?

The second time that we find Mary mentioned is in circumstances very different, in the eleventh chapter of St. John's gospel, in a setting where the shadows have gathered and the darkness has fallen, for into the home at Bethany sorrow has come. But here again when Mary is mentioned, when she comes into the story, we find her at the same place, at His feet. And so the second lesson that we can learn from Mary's love is this, that

2. THE PROBLEMS OF LOVE ARE RESOLVED AT THE FEET OF JESUS

To me it is worth noting that this home, where the members of the family truly loved the Lord, was not without its problems. This was a home loved by Christ, and in which He was most truly loved, but in spite of this, or, might it be, because of it, this home had its problems none the less. Let us then note first of all here

(i) *The Doubt that Hurt*. Sickness had come, and with it the immediate thought of the Master's help, and the messenger was sent, swift-footed, praying Him to come. But He did not come. Instead He seems deliberately to have delayed His return. In verse 6 we read, "When he had heard therefore

that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was." It is almost certain that by the time the message reached Jesus, Lazarus was already dead. But He waited, still in the same place where He was, and for two days. How long those days must have seemed in the stricken home at Bethany! Why this delay? Did it mean that He did not care? Was the One they loved indifferent to their need? Why had He done nothing—why this inaction—why this delay? And so doubt beat in fiercely upon the hearts of Mary and Martha, and when they met Him that doubt showed itself in their greetings. "If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." As if to say, "You could have been here. You would have been here if you had cared." How often that same doubt still hurts! God's delays perplex us. His inaction seems to indicate His indifference, and how deep the wound! For when at last word reached the home that Christ was coming, while Martha was roused to action and reproach, Mary sat still in the house, her grief too deep for words. And so it was that Christ sent a special word to Mary through Martha, saying "I want you" and, obedient, as love ever is to the least wish of the one loved, Mary rises and goes to her Lord, and goes to her old place, "at his feet" (v. 32). And here it was that Mary made

(ii) *The Discovery that Healed*—and there is no place like the feet of Jesus for resolving the problems that perplex our hearts. The discovery that Mary made at His feet was first of all of *His care*, for when she looked up into the face of her Master, she saw the tears streaming down His face. "Jesus wept"—and so He did care!

The second discovery she made was not just of His care, but of *His control*, and here possibly is the heart of the lesson that Mary learned and that we learn, for not for one moment had the situation been out of control. This delay of Christ, this seeming denial, was not without intent. In verse 15, He

had said to His own disciples that it was intentional, it was "for your sakes", and Mary learned this lesson—that *Christ had not done the lesser thing in order that He might do the greater*. He did not heal a *sick* man in order that He might raise a *dead* man, and however great the lesser thing must have seemed at the time to the mind and heart of Mary, it was not as great as that which was in the mind of Christ.

Is it not so with us still? We too come with our prayers and our petitions, pleading with Christ to do for us that which seems to us so great, and yet all the time the situation is under His complete control, planning to do not the thing that to us seems to be great, but something which is greater still. Let us remember then the discovery that Mary made, at His feet, and let us carry it with us into the problems and perplexities of our own love, that again and again Christ does not do the lesser thing in order that He may do the greater.

Mary is mentioned unmistakably in just one other passage of Scripture, in the following chapter in St. John's gospel, and here we can learn the third lesson that Mary's love teaches us. The first was that the place of love is found at the feet of Jesus; the second that the problems of love are resolved at the feet of Jesus; and the third that

3. THE PERCEPTION OF LOVE IS QUICKENED AT THE FEET OF JESUS

The scene in the opening verses of John 12 is a scene of festivity and rejoicing. It was a social occasion. It was a thanksgiving meeting. They were in the house of Simon. They had met with many of their friends in order to rejoice with Mary and Martha at the miracle of the restoration of Lazarus to them. Martha, masterful woman as she was, had taken charge of the refreshments, but Mary was at her old place, at the feet of Jesus. I said it was a festive occasion, and

in a sense that is true, for everyone was in a festive mood. Everyone?—no, not all, for two persons in the company were not at one with the mood of the rest. The first was Christ, and the other was Mary. Here in this home at Bethany, as we watch Mary's love for Christ, we see first of all

(i) *The Discernment of Love*. Love always sees further than others see. Love is strangely sensitive to the mood of those it loves. A mother can very often tell a child's thoughts without the child ever speaking. I remember in my own childhood on one occasion sitting by the fire in the drawing-room at home. My mother was busy doing the mending, sitting in the chair opposite. I had raging toothache, but I was trying to bear it because I knew that if I told my mother it would mean a visit to the dentist, the thought of which I did not relish! And so I sat, gazing into the fire; and then my mother spoke, "George, have you got toothache?" was her question. She knew because she loved.

And so Mary's eyes were watching her Lord that night, and she knew that His heart was heavy with the thought of the Cross which was so near, and as Mary looked up into the eyes of her Lord that night she saw there the gathering darkness, and I think that Christ was glad that she knew.

But not only is the discernment of love portrayed here but

(ii) *The Desire of Love*—that desire to share the burden, to enter into the experience. How could Mary show her Lord that she knew; how could she tell Him that He would not be alone in the sacrifice that He was to make? Was it not this desire of her love which made her bring that costly alabaster box of ointment and lavish it on Him? She would not allow Him to remain uncomforted, and so she brought her best, almost her all. Prodigal the gift might be, wasteful it might seem but, oh, how welcome to the heart of Christ! and when the cold voice of criticism spoke, "Why was not

this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?" Christ broke in sharply, almost harshly, "Let her alone. Against the day of my burying has she kept this." As if the gift meant so much to Christ that He could not bear the thought of it being taken from Him again.

Yes, the perception of love is quickened at the feet of Jesus. How much clumsy and awkward piety there is in the Church today. What need there is for Christian living that is sensitive to the mind of God. How much we hurt because we blunder. Keen and zealous we may be for Christ, but clumsy and rough in our handling of men. Is it any wonder that Paul so frequently prayed for others that their "love may abound yet more and more in knowledge"? But if we are going to know the Lord better, and if we are to become more sensitive and more discerning, we must spend more time at His feet, for let us remember that the perception of love is quickened at the feet of Jesus.

Dr. S. D. Gordon in one of his books tells of an incident which bears the same message. He tells of a rider, riding through a dark forest, where the trees were so dense that they met overhead, shutting out the very light of the sun. But as he rode along the shaded path he came at last to a clearing, across which the path led him. Here the sunshine was brilliant. At the further side of the clearing was an old tumble-down shack, and in the garden an old Negro woman with snowy white hair. As the rider drew near he called out a cheery greeting, "Hullo, Aunty! Living here all alone?" The old Negress straightened her back and lifted up her wrinkled face to see who the caller was, and then replying, a great smile lit her face as she called back, "Yes, jes' me—and Jesus, Massa." Another Mary, living "at His feet".

“He heard . . . he went . . . he besought . . .
he believed.”

John 4: 47, 50

9

THE PROGRESSIVENESS OF FAITH

I WANT to consider with you what I have called “The Progressiveness of Faith”. We would all be agreed that faith in Christ is fundamental, not only to salvation but to the whole structure of Christian living. Again and again in the Word of God its importance is traced—“The just shall live by faith”; “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5: 4). The eleventh chapter of Hebrews gives us the record of the men and women of faith. These and scores of other passages of Scripture teach us that faith is essential and fundamental to spiritual progress and achievement, and yet when it comes to the point and we are seeking to exercise faith in Christ, it seems to become elusive, unreal, unworkable, and so we forsake it and get down to working our way, to tackling our problems almost entirely by our own effort. It was to this particular aspect of truth that the Keswick Convention sought to address itself, and, indeed, one of our Christian periodicals, born out of the Convention movement, testifies to this emphasis by its very name. It is called *The Life of Faith*.

To me, at one time, this kind of language proved only irritating and tantalizing—sanctification by faith in Jesus, trusting Him for victory. It all seemed so unreal, so unattain-

able, so elusive, so unpractical. Until one day I stumbled across the story which will be found in the 4th chapter of St. John's gospel and verses 46 to 54, and then I began to realize that faith has its component parts. It has its progressive steps. Once that key was in my hands, I found the answer to my problems beginning to emerge. What I want to do now is to take these steps with you and with this man of whom we read, and trust that the lessons God taught me may be as great a help to you.

There are four words in this passage that I would note with you; each represents a distinct step in the progressiveness of the faith of the nobleman. In verse 47 we read, "He *heard* . . . he *went* . . . he *besought*", and in verse 50 we read, "he *believed*".

The first step that we take with this man is when we see his faith as

I. FAITH HEARING

"He heard that Jesus was come into Galilee." That is to say, reports reached him about Christ, and what he heard, he believed. Note two things here. First of all:

(i) *The Background of his Faith.* The background to this man's faith in Christ was that he had lost faith in everything else. The illness of his son had put to the test his faith in the ability of the doctors to heal him, and in the sufficiency of his own resources to save him, but all in vain. The son of his love was at the point of death, and he was at the end of his resources. It was the bankruptcy of his own resources that prepared the way for faith in Christ. This man would never have experienced the power of Christ unless he had first experienced the poverty of his own soul.

I wonder how often we remember that the man who said, "I can do all things through Christ", said also, "I know that in me there dwelleth no good thing." May I suggest that an

essential part of the discipline of God in our lives is to teach us the bankruptcy of everything that is human in the work of the Kingdom of God? The bankruptcy of human personality, of mere human ability, even of intellectual knowledge, of scholastic training; the bankruptcy in the realm of the spirit of everything human. I believe that the discipline of God will so order our lives that if we ever forget this truth then we shall relearn it in circumstances that leave us without a shadow of doubt as to the truth of our own bankruptcy.

Note secondly:

(ii) *The Basis of his Faith.* It was very simply *the person of Christ*. We want to remember that we are not discussing faith in the abstract, but faith in Jesus Christ. Reports reaching this man brought to him the picture, inadequate and incomplete, but enough, of One who alone could meet the need of his life. "He *heard*", and what he heard he believed. I recall that Scripture which confirms this in Romans 10: 17, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God". To us, the person of Christ is revealed not simply in the chance reports of men, although they may still have their part to play, but through the written Word of God, in which is unveiled the living Word. Hence the vital need that the man of faith be a man of the Book. Knowledge is the basis of faith, and only as we come to *know* Him are we prepared to trust Him, and we can only know Him as we seek His presence and share His purposes.

But I want you to note this, that although this man believed all the reports about Christ that he heard, his need was still unmet. His son was still at the point of death, and although we too may believe intellectually in the truth of the reports we hear, and are convinced of the ability of Christ to meet our need, our need too may remain unmet. Is there, then, a further step that faith must take? Yes: he heard, and he went unto Him. Faith hearing became:

2. FAITH SEEKING

"He *went* unto Him." It is possibly worth noting in passing that God does not encourage laziness, for here we find faith stirred to action, faith seeking to relate the ability of Christ to its own need. Faith hearing has become faith seeking. Think of

(i) *The Demands of the Search.* Capernaum was some little distance from Cana, and Christ was continually on the move. I wonder if the weather was really hot, and if the heat tempted the nobleman to give up the search. I wonder how many false trails he followed. Christ had been here, or there, so he was told. But by the time the nobleman got there the scent was cold and Christ was gone. But through it all he pushed on, determined to find Christ at all costs. Let us not think then that God gives to those who do not ask—that those find who never seek—that doors open without our knocking. For us all the demands of the search will be exacting. There will be the hard grind of daily Bible study; the self-imposed discipline of daily prayer; the earnest quest in the realm of literature, reading this book and that; the trial and error of experiments made before the truth is found; the sting of disappointments and of discouragements to be faced and overcome; but all the time faith's goal is held steadily in view—Christ Himself and the experience of His power. Yes, the demands of the search must be met. And think too of

(ii) *The Duration of the Search.* Did it take one day or two, or a week, to find the Master? The return journey took one whole day. The Bible tells us that. How quickly we want our problems resolved. How easily we want the answer found. "Give God time" was one of F. B. Meyer's favourite words of counsel to younger Christians. "Delays are not denials", said Bishop Taylor Smith, and added, "Waiting time need not be wasted time." May it not have been that

the duration of the search did something to the father? Did the time spent in the search underscore the desperateness of the situation? Did it focus his faith and trust more and more vividly on Christ? As the hours slipped by and the position of his son became more desperate, did the conviction now grip the father that Christ alone must be the answer? And when finally he found the Christ, was it not as a desperate man that he flung himself at His feet? The duration of the search. Is there a lesson here for us? Is there a quality that can be given to faith that time alone can give, a quality of desperation, almost of despair? Too often we want to dance lightly and easily along, and almost flippantly tap the resources of the power of Christ. But again and again in God's dealings with us the time element plays a vital and decisive part.

I make no pretence to be an expert in the culinary art, but in past days I did have some measure of skill in the making of chocolate fudge, and even now I find that my own sister still consults me when she is making it with the question, "Do you think it is time to take it off?" Take it off too soon, or leave it on too long, and you spoil it. Again the time element has a part to play in achieving perfection. May it not be so with faith? And so faith hearing becomes faith seeking and yet the need of the nobleman was still unmet. Is there another step that faith must take? Yes, there is. He heard, he went, and now we read, "He besought". Faith hearing, became faith seeking, became

3. FAITH PLEADING

Verse 47, "and besought him that he would come down". The man is on his knees now before Christ. He is praying. Here two thoughts emerge.

(i) *The Reality of his Faith is Proved.* This man was proved to be in earnest. He would not otherwise be kneeling there,

humbling himself there in the eyes of others. Prayer is always the proof of the reality of our faith and of the intensity of our desire. It was Christ who joined together prayer with desire. "Whatsoever things ye desire when ye pray". The reality of our faith in Christ is not to be proved by our eloquence in debate, by our thoroughness in organization or even our diligence in preparation, but by the passion in our praying. Does our faith prove its reality because it takes us to our knees? Does the problem that baffles us find its place on the agenda of a conference, or on the lips of a suppliant? You may well say, "That is just where my faith has taken me. I have prayed and prayed and prayed until I am sick and tired of praying." Well, let us watch the Master and note not only that the reality of this man's faith was proved, but

(ii) *The Quality of his Faith is Probed.* To this desperate man, this man so utterly in earnest, Christ said in effect, "Stop a minute, while I check up on this faith of yours. Is it really in Me? Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." In other words, Christ was probing this man's faith. Was it really in Christ alone, or in something else? And Christ would still check up on the quality of our faith in Him. "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." Except you have an ecstasy of emotion, you will not believe; unless you have a warmth of feeling, you will not believe; unless you have some sign, some wonder, you will not believe. Christ would ask us, where is our faith? Is it in Him or is it in some sign or wonder? How often we are in danger of looking to the emotional rather than to the spiritual. We want a crutch of emotion to support us, putting our faith in the crutch rather than in Christ; the spectacular appeals more than the spiritual. But this man was not interested in signs and wonders, he was interested only in Christ. All he did was to restate his need. "Sir, come down, ere my child die" and then his faith took the final step. Very simply Christ took him as

he was and in three words Christ covered this man's need. "Go thy way, *thy son liveth*." "And the man believed the word that Jesus spake unto him and went his way." Faith hearing became faith seeking, became faith pleading, and now becomes

4. FAITH RESTING

"The man *believed the word that Jesus had spoken* unto him, and he went his way." Note with me very simply in closing

(i) *He Stopped Praying*. There is a time when we must stop praying a certain kind of prayer. Look at the face of the man. The simple words of Christ have been heard. They left nothing ungranted. They covered his need absolutely—"Thy son liveth." Gradually the tense look goes from his face, his hands unclench, his body relaxes, his head drops. Then he rises quietly and goes his way with nothing more than the statement of the Master. The statement, mark you, not the promise, for a statement it was—"Thy son liveth." Praying has become believing; faith pleading has become faith resting. He stopped praying, for sometimes our praying becomes little more than an exercise of unbelief. Like the Israelites, we march round and round our Jerichoes, not seven times, but seventy times seven, and the longer we march the closer we get to the walls of our problems, until they seem to tower above us, shutting out the very light of the sky. Is there someone reading these words, whose soul is on the march too, round some Jericho of a problem that is towering above you? May I suggest that there comes the time when we must stop marching, indeed stop praying, if we are praying in unbelief, and start believing. Yes, he stopped praying, and

(ii) *He Started Proving*. "He went his way." Yes, with nothing more than the word of Christ, and yet did he need

anything more than that? For as he was now going he met his servants . . . and so he knew.

The word of Christ was the expression of the will of Christ, and the expression of the will of Christ led to the experience of His power. I do not know what your problem may be, but I believe with all my heart that Christ has something to say about it, and when Christ speaks what He says may be in the form of a promise, but it may be in the form of a statement. If your faith in Christ brings you to His feet He will meet you there, and if your faith which has been a hearing faith has become a seeking faith, has become a pleading faith, the moment will come when Christ speaks to you and your faith can reach its ultimate and only true goal, a faith that is resting in Him. There is no tension in faith. There is simply trust.

And so faith finds itself singing the words of the hymn:

“Jesus! I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart. . . .
Keep me ever trusting, resting,
Fill me with Thy grace.”

*"There is no fear in love; but perfect love
casteth out fear: because fear hath torment."*

1 John 4: 18

IO

"PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR"

I WONDER how you have been getting on in your Christian life? One often finds that there comes a stage in most people's experience when moments arise of very real tension in the heart and mind. It may be a growing realization of what God's will is, and a reluctance to face it. It may be a time of building up a resistance to God's will, for fear of what that might hold. It may be an eagerness, a desire and longing to do the will of God, coupled with a tremendous dread that one could never do it.

I believe there may be some reader in that tension, and possibly this word from God's Word may be God's answer to your need. These three phrases each suggest something to me. First of all there is suggested here—

I. A TYRANNY: "fear hath torment". The meaning behind that word is, as translated here, torment, or as translated somewhere else, punishment, with a sense of restraint; and taking these three together and blending them, you have the characteristics of tyranny: torment, punishment, restraint—the tyranny of fear. I should not be a bit surprised if fear is the dominating emotion in some of our hearts and minds at this moment and stage in our Christian life.

We all know something about fear, do we not? I tried to

think it through; what is there that constitutes the essence of fear? What is the basis of it; what underlies it? I want to suggest to you three basic factors. I may be afraid because of *an insufficiency of which my soul is aware*.

You may be getting afraid about the whole issue of the Christian life because, as you see it, the path of God's will is going to be difficult; you feel you have not the courage for it, or the strength for it. The obedience that God asks is going to be a hard thing. You think of the loneliness that it may lead to, the high standard that God requires; and then you look into your own heart and experience and soul, and see there the utter insufficiency, the inability even to think of entering into God's will; and you feel not a little bit miserable, because you are afraid. Just as, in quite different circumstances, if you knew you could not swim you would be more than a little bit frightened if you were in a boat which was sinking, because of your insufficiency or your inability.

But there is another element in fear and its tyranny: firstly the insufficiency of which my soul is aware, and then, secondly, *an imagination in which my thought is active*.

A tremendous part of fear is built up by the imagination. Situations are pictured and conjured up which never eventuate. Experiences are endured which are never encountered. Have you ever had to have an injection? Did you not have it more than once?—you may even have had it six times or more before the needle touched you! So often in life our imagination is active and our thought busy, and we can build up a whole experience of fear which is based upon unreal imaginings. We must all have faced a situation we were afraid of, an interview or an operation: our imagination was very active, but when it was all over did we not say, "It was not half as bad as I imagined it would be"?

The insufficiency of which my soul is aware; the imagination in which my thought is active, these both create fear;

but there is another element—consider, thirdly, *an intention of which my heart is afraid*.

It sometimes happens that we find ourselves in the hands of others of whose intentions we are not sure. You will possibly remember when you were small and at school, that when you received an invitation from the headmaster, of whose intentions you were not quite certain (it might be that he was going to offer you a cheque, but more likely apply a cane), the very fact that you were uncertain of his intentions made that day rather miserable until the interview was over; and then your mind was at rest, if your body was not!

Yet again, friendship can come into a girl's life, and with it possibly love—love on her side, she knows that; but she is not quite certain of the intention on the other side: is it just friendship, or is it going to be the fulfilment of her dreams? The very uncertainty makes her afraid.

So there is a great complex element entering into the tyranny of fear: “fear hath torment”. How many of us are under that tyranny just now? We are not quite certain what the intention of God is, and we are more than a bit afraid of the whole realm of the intention of the will of God, of which we feel we know nothing. We are really afraid of going any further with God.

Though this verse speaks of a tyranny, it also speaks of—

2. A REMEDY. We read in this verse not only that fear hath torment, but that “there is no fear in love”. The same number of letters are found in both words, and if I was talking to children I would have the word “fear” spelt out on separate cards. F-E-A-R, that is the tyranny, and then I would take four other cards, L-O-V-E, and I would put L over F, O over E, V over A, and E over R—there is no fear in love.

Let us think how those elements which constitute our fear are hidden and changed by love. Take this first element of

fear, the insufficiency of which my soul is aware. There is no fear in love; why? Because of *the lavishness of love's giving*. You and I are afraid because of our insufficiency, our inability. Listen; do you think that God is going to leave that insufficiency, that inability, undealt with? Do you think He is going to leave that need unsupplied? Can you imagine a girl of poor circumstances marrying a man of abundant wealth and being left by the one who is now her husband to live with him on the slender resources of her own penury, to dress herself according to the limits of her own poverty? Can you imagine a man doing that? I suppose a man might if he did not love the girl; but you cannot imagine God doing that, can you? We read, "God so loved . . . that He gave" and He still loves and still gives. The one hall-mark of true love is love's desire to give. That is the difference between love and lust: lust takes, love gives.

The lavishness of the giving of the love of God—how adequately this should deal with the fear that is based upon the insufficiency of which my soul is aware! It is met and covered by the lavishness of love's giving!

What about the imagination in which my thought is active? I think not only of the lavishness of love's giving, but also of *the limit of love's thinking*. Oh, yes, love has its dreams, love has its hopes. Love paints its pictures on the imagination of the mind, and thus its joys are multiplied; but in certain directions there is a limit beyond which love will not go, and that limit is determined both by the character of the one loved, and by the quality and character of the love wherewith we love. Have you ever said concerning someone you know and love, "Why, I would never dream of thinking such a thing!" Both the character of that person and the character of your love have together set a limit beyond which your thoughts will not go. Don't you think that the character of God sets a limit beyond which our thinking about God

should not go? Oh, these imaginings that are the very fabric of our fears! Let us not treat God's love as we would never treat another's. Recognize that love sets a limit to its thinking!

The lavishness of love's giving, the limit of love's thinking, and to me thirdly and possibly the most treasured thought of all—what I call *the loveliness of love's planning*.

What can we do about these intentions of which our hearts are afraid? I would ask why it is that so many of us identify the will of God with unpleasant things? In fact, some people honestly reach a state where they cannot believe that a certain thing is God's will because they want to do it; because it means joy and happiness. They think that God's will is always hard, always unpleasant, always designed to make them unhappy. The loveliness of love's planning: see, here is a mother—no, she is not yet a mother, but that gift to which she and her husband are looking forward is on the way, and those hands are busy day and night, planning the daintiest wear, the loveliest garments. Everything that love can plan is planned in detail and with infinite care. The loveliness of love's planning. Here is a girl looking forward to her wedding day: she is looking forward to her first home of her very own, and she is busy planning everything that she can think of that will make her a joy to her husband, that will make their home everything that he and she would want it to be. She does not go round to all his friends asking what her fiancé does not like, and making a register in her mind so that on the first day in the home after the honeymoon he will have those things to eat! She would not do a thing like that; yet some of us think that God is hard at work along those very lines!

Here is a home awaiting the return of the father who has been away ill, and what excitement and what plans and what expectations! all the planning of love is for the happiness of the one loved. Oh, these intentions of which we are afraid!

I read, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Oh, if I could only get a glimpse into the mind and heart of God, I should find the love of God planning with infinite care and exactness of detail and thoughtfulness and consideration, everything that is designed for my happiness and God's glory.

There is no fear in love. The tyranny, the remedy, and just very shortly as I close—

3. THE CERTAINTY. Perfect love casteth out fear. The suggestion is here that there is growth in love; that word "perfect" is a word of completeness—and we read also here in the same verse of an incompleteness in love. There is a certainty that characterizes perfect love; developed, mature love will cast out fear; that is the certainty. Let us just note very simply these three things. First of all, *the reality upon which love rests*—"We love him because he first loved us."

The reality upon which our love for Christ and for God rests, is the certainty of His love for us. Where do we have the guarantee, the assurance, the reality upon which our love can rest? Listen: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" The measure of the reality of the love of God is in the Cross of His Son: that is the reality upon which my love rests.

You all know the story of the little girl who used to shrink when her mother touched her, for the mother's hand was scarred. How hurt the mother was to see that little child of hers shrink away almost with abhorrence! One day when she could not bear it any longer, she took the little tot into her arms and told her about those ugly, scarred hands—how when she was a little baby her cot had caught fire, and the mother's hands had gone into that flaming cot and had lifted the little one out, and as a result the hands were scarred. That

little girl was never afraid of those hands again! I like to think that the Master's hand is a scarred hand, and if ever you are tempted to doubt His love, look at the scars!

The reality upon which love rests, and then note also the *intimacy in which love grows*, for love is a growing thing. As in human love there is completeness and incompleteness, there are different depths, different degrees, so is there in the mutual relationship betwixt us and God. What is it that governs the depth of our love to God? There is another verse in the Epistle on which I had thought I ought to speak until God switched my mind on to this subject, and this verse may help us here. Do you remember the words, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another”? What is the essential for a growing love through a deepening fellowship? It is that we should be where God is: in the light! With human love, you sometimes find love dying out between husband and wife, and so often it is because the one is not where the other is—there is a great gap between; the distance between them has grown spiritually, or it may be physically; and it is not easy to maintain love when there is distance, because where there is distance there is absence, and where there is absence, fellowship is lost! The intimacy in which love grows is that of fellowship.

The last thought is *the authority by which love rules*. Perfect love casteth out fear, and there is no questioning of that authority. Is there any authority we obey so readily as the authority of love? Love exercises a dictatorship which is absolute; and how wonderful a dictatorship it is! Sometimes when I am playing with my smaller boy, aged four, I pretend that I am fighting him. I clench my fists at him and frown at him, I prance round him, and push out my fists at him. Do you know what he does? He runs straight into my arms! His love trusts my love, and I could not hit a little chap who did that; could you? Perfect love casteth out fear. Sometimes

your picture of God and mine is the picture of a frowning face, and a clenched fist, and a dominating presence; but that is not the God we have come to know in Christ. The loveliest definition of the life of holiness which I think I have ever come across is one which has no element of tension in it, but one which I believe has the secret. I came across it while reading the life of Adolph Saphir. He said something like this: "If you want to live the Christian life as you are meant to live it, get into the presence of God and then *do whatever you like.*"

Child of God—you should be living in the love of the Father. Get there, will you; and you will find that this verse will become true in your experience. The tyranny will go; the remedy will be applied; and the certainty will come. There is no fear in love; and if for some time past you have been all tensed up until you think something is going to snap, let all that go, in the knowledge of the love of God, which is eternal and unchanging!

Let us make our response in the words of a lovely hymn—

"Oh, my Father, take me, make me
Pure and holy, all Thine own;
May each changing moment find me
At Thy footstool, near Thy throne."

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a
merchant man."

Matt. 13:45

II

IN BUSINESS WITH GOD

I REMEMBER reading some years ago the wonderful life-story of C. T. Studd, and in the introduction to the book, the writer, Norman Grubb, said that one of the characteristics of Studd was that he was far less concerned about his own sanctification than he was concerned about the salvation of others. But I would like to suggest that the very fact that a man is concerned about the salvation of others is a mark of sanctification! That is to say, that the Christian doctrine of holiness, or whatever you like to call it, is not something inactive, but it is something positive and active. If you remember the stories and parables of our Lord, you will find, again and again, that His most severe condemnation and judgment fell not upon the people who did *wrong* but upon the people who did *nothing*.

We would do well to spare some time and thought to the whole question of Christian service as a mark of true Christian living. It used to be traditional in evangelical circles to think of a keen Christian as a person who did *not* do this or that or the other, a completely negative portrayal of the Christian life, and to lose sight of the fact that a true Christian is not only a person who does not do this or that, but, far more positively, is one who *does* much more. Holiness is not merely

the sinlessness of God reproduced in the life of the Christian, but the selflessness of the love of God active in the Church. So that possibly one of the most grievous sins of the Christian Church today is the sin of inaction, the sin of laziness, the sin of not doing what God calls us to do.

It is against this background that I want, if I may, to do what no good preacher should ever do, to take a text right out of its context! In St. Matthew's gospel, in one of the shorter parables, our Lord says, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man." We will not concern ourselves, at the moment, with what our Lord had to say in this parable as a whole, but I would suggest that by taking only the first words we can take as our theme "the Christian man as a business man". Some of you will say, at once, that the parson knows nothing about business, so why should I talk along that line? Indeed, I do not know very much about business, but I think that as far as the business of a Christian is concerned and the life of service, there are, at any rate, some things in common with any decent business concern. There are, I would submit, six essentials for the Christian business person; that is, if you are in business for Christ, six things that ought to mark your life as a Christian.

The first concerns *the convictions we must have*. I have never been in business, but I would like to think that if I were, I would have very real convictions about two things: first, the *worth* of the goods I was trying to market, and secondly, the *need* for them. I would not like to be in business putting out things of no real worth or for which there was no real need, and I feel that to be a good business man and to be in a worthwhile business it is essential to have a deep conviction of the worth of one's goods or services and the need for them. Now, that is exactly where we begin in the Christian realm. You remember the testimony of the early Church, so fully convinced of the worth of the goods they offered.

The tragedy today is that that conviction is lacking; we have not got a real conviction of the worth of the goods we are offering. It is one of the most urgent matters within the Christian Church that we should enter into a fuller experience of the Christian life offered to us in Christ, not only that we might have life more abundant, but that there might also be a real conviction as to its worth, so that we can go out and offer it to others. Apart from the fact that your sins are forgiven, what have you got that works out in practical daily living that is worth handing on to another person? In the early Church it was the personal conviction based on a personal experience that was so completely satisfying and so tremendously worth having that was preached and emphasized. "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him." These are the convictions I must have.

Secondly, *the contacts I must make*. In my circle of friends is a man who has been a very successful business man. He has done very well. I remember talking to him and his wife on one occasion when he recalled the early conditions of his career. He bicycled far and near, reaching out in order to establish his market, making contacts everywhere, working very hard in all weathers on his push-bike. He has not got a push-bike now! He has done well! And although I do not know a lot about business, I should imagine that in business you do not just sit down and wait for business to drop into your lap. You have got to get your living, you have got to go after folk, you have got to make contacts, and so, a big business firm will have its travellers going all over the country, year in and year out, making contacts.

Are you making contact with anybody for Christ? Is not the whole attitude of the Church at the moment just the reverse? Sitting within its walls and complaining that people will not come to church? Christ never said they would, and

I would submit that God's complaint is not with the people who will not come to church, but with the people who are in church and who do not go out to get the folk outside. "Go ye into all the world", said Christ, and the world, I suggest, starts with the circle of business friends and social friends and relations you have. Are you making contact? Do you say it is the vicar's job? Who told you that, where did you get that idea? Not from the Bible. No, it is the Church's job, and if you are part of the Church, it is your job. Are you making contacts for Christ among your friends by your prayers, by your friendship? Not the kind of contact that is easy, not just giving out tracts to people you have never seen before and, possibly, hope you will never see again. Not that I decry the value of tracts, but I am thinking of the long, costly, wearying way of our Lord, who was called the friend of sinners.

God has given you a personality that is unique; there is not another person in the world like you! You are a key that God wants to fit into certain locks that no other key will fit. There are people you can touch for Christ whom nobody else can. Your pulpit may be your own fireside. A friend calls, and the conversation follows the normal pattern; the weather, the Government, then the Church, possibly the parson, and then, what an opportunity to lead it a stage further and deeper to Christ. Have you ever had the joy of leading anybody to Christ; have you ever had the joy of finding that you have been used by God to make a contact for Christ? I know it works, I have seen it happen again and again. I have known what it is to go to a church with very little life, and see it filled, not by me, but by the people simply making contacts. If we really got down to it, there would be no need of campaigns or special missions; evangelism would be going on all the year round. Instead of one man struggling to do the work in your church there

would be fifty or a hundred, all making contacts. Instead of the one building with its rather strange, perhaps dingy furniture, there would be thousands of points of contact, in homes, offices, factories, shops, all over the place. That is the way the early Church grew; they went everywhere.

Are you contacting anyone now? If not, I would submit that you are sinning; not the sin of commission, but of omission. If I walk by a river and throw someone in, I commit a sin of commission, I am doing wrong. If I walk by a river and see someone in the water drowning and do nothing to save him, then I commit the sin of omission. I am doing wrong in failing to do something. What a grievous sin in the Church, the sin of not doing anything! *The contacts I must make.* Once, when motoring in Scotland, I had trouble with the car and had to stop. Before long an A.A. Scout drove up and asked whether he could help. I said I would be very grateful. Then he noticed there was no A.A. badge on the car. "Are you a member, sir?" he asked. "Well, no, as a matter of fact, I am not," I replied; "I have been thinking about it for quite a time." Before we parted I had written a cheque, filled up the form and joined the A.A. But the point is this, I had been going to do it but it needed someone to come along to get me to take the step. Perhaps there are many placed like that, thinking about coming to Christ; they have been meaning to do so for a long time, but need someone to contact them and get them to do it.

The convictions I must have, the contacts I must make, and now, *the competition I must face.* It is the rule in business to find competition; you expect it, and if you are sensible, you learn from it. If you work for Christ you must expect competitors; "there are many adversaries". Christian folk look upon the desecration of Sunday as a great hindrance in the work of the Church of God. They blame it for low attendance at Sunday School and empty churches; they com-

plain of competitors. But the early Church grew up in a world without a Sunday, and they did not complain! So great was the power of God in the Church that it smashed competition and captured the market. I do not believe in anything which makes it difficult for children or adults to worship God on His day, but far better get on with the job entrusted to us than spend the time complaining and grouching and grumbling about the competition. Frankly, there is nothing to fear from competition if we have the conviction that there is not a single thing the world can offer to compare with the life offered in Christ. There is no fellowship in the world that can claim to be a finer fellowship or come anywhere near the true fellowship of the Church of Christ. It can stand up to any competition.

Next, *the costs I must shoulder*. There is no need to apologize for talking about money in Christian things. "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." It is not necessary always to spiritualize this; God is talking in terms of hard cash. "You bring the money," He says, in effect, "and I will give a blessing." It is a tragedy to-day that the world should spend its millions while the Church offers its pence. It is all wrong.

I wonder what your Church Hall is like. Are its walls as clean as the walls of your lounge at home? Do you offer visitors at home a bench to sit on like the kind you have in your Church Hall? We do not mind spending to get a nice new carpet for home, but when it comes to the Church, aren't we inclined to take the attitude that anything will do for the House of God? It is a disgrace! It is not so much that we have not got the money as that we have not got the desire to give; that is the trouble. *The costs I must shoulder*.

The man in business is prepared to spend money to make his place attractive, to display his goods. Do we do the same with our Church? It is no excuse to say that the money is not there; it is just not true, the money is there; it is the desire to give to the work of God that is lacking. Do you give a tenth of your income to God? Put it aside, not only for work in your Church, but for other Christian interests. The mission field is being starved for lack of money. How can we be effective in business for Christ if we are not prepared to shoulder the costs? At a conference held recently behind the Iron Curtain every visitor there was given elaborately produced literature costing at least £5; so often, the best the Church can do is a small leaflet to further its Christian business. The costs I must shoulder.

The courage I must display. You may remember the words from a well-known prayer, "Teach us, Good Lord, to give and not to count the cost, *to fight and not to heed the wounds.*" One gets knocked about in business, and the Christian business is no exception; it takes courage to go on, courage to dare, courage to hold on in the face of whatever adversity may come.

"My hand is on the plough, my faltering hand,
But all in front of me is untilled land,
The wilderness and solitary place,
The lonely desert and its interspace.
What harvest have I but this paltry grain,
These dwindling husks and handfuls of dry corn,
These poor lean stalks? My courage is outworn;
Keep me from turning back.
The handles of my plough with tears are wet,
The shares with rust are spoiled; and yet, and yet,
O God, my God, keep me from turning back!"

Lastly, *the confidence I must inspire*. I think in business you will find that the final test is one of confidence in the man and in the goods he sells. Mr. Tom Rees has said, "You will never get people to trust your Saviour until they trust you." The confidence I must inspire. Is that what happens wherever you go? Do you inspire confidence so that people with whom you come into contact say they feel sure that what you offer must be worth having? "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man." Being a Christian is like being in business. Are we being good business men in our Christian profession? Is it as sound as we would wish our business to be?

"All power is given unto me. . . . Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . and lo, I am with you always."

Matt. 28: 18-20

I 2

THE SIN OF INACTIVITY

I WANT to think out with you what I have called "The sin of inactivity". If we were to discuss together what we felt to be the most common sin in the life of the Christian Church, the most deadly sin in its effect upon the life and witness of that Church, I wonder what conclusion we would reach.

I wonder how many of us would think of the sin of inaction. We want to remember two things: first of all that inaction is stated to be sin. In James 4: 17 we read "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin", and secondly we ought to remember that the sin of inaction receives the severest condemnation from the lips of the Master.

Do you remember the parable of the talents, and how Christ's condemnation fell on the man who had, by doing nothing, done wrong? I want to suggest to you that to-day by far the most common and greatest sins of the Christian are not sins of commission but sins of omission.

How lightly the words of the General Confession fall from our lips without any consciousness of what we are saying: "We have left undone those things which we ought

to have done." If you and I recall the words of Christ "Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" and realize that the perfection of love as seen in God the Father is also to be seen in the lives of His children, and if we stop to consider the activity of that love and then look at the inaction of our own lives, we can begin to realize in some way how far we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Let us consider then this sin of inactivity and do so in the light of the words of our Lord, which I have already quoted from the closing verses of St. Matthew's gospel. Here we find first of all (1) *A Directive which is Plain.*

"Go ye therefore to all nations." Immediately the words of Christ in His directive to the Church evoke (a) *the suggestion of a contrast.* A contrast between the command of Christ to the Church, and the complaint of the Church today about the world. How often do we hear from the lips of Christian men and women and even from the pulpits of our land the pathetic complaint concerning the world and the people in it, "They won't come to church"—but did Christ ever say they would come, or that we were to expect them to come?

As I see it in the light of this directive of the Master, we have no business as Christian men and women to sit within the four walls of our churches and complain, "They won't come to church." Christ said we were to go to them, and so I would ask you to answer this question: not "Why won't they come?" but "Why won't you go?"

Are you as an individual Christian reaching out to other lives, reaching out to them by your prayers, so that your prayers are not continually asking things for yourself, but asking things for others too? Are you going out to others with your friendship, or is your circle of friends restricted to a small monastic clique of other Christians with whom you have a special affinity of heart and mind?

Our Lord was called the friend of sinners and His love was continually reaching out to others with His friendship. Today the average Christian is far more the sinner's critic than his friend. And so instead of living lives constrained by an outreaching heart and love, we find so many professing Christians and church members living in spiritual idleness and enjoyment; orthodox in their creed, respectable in their character, exclusive in their friendships, but in their lack of love for the souls of men a complete caricature of the Christ.

Some Christian churches might almost be monasteries for all the contact that there would seem to be between those within and those without. Is it not a startling thought that amongst the companies of decent church-going folk that are to be found all over our country, all of them professing Christians, presumably born again of the Spirit of God, are some of the greatest sinners in Christendom?

Great sinners because their lives are stamped with the sin of inactivity. In this directive of the Master there is not only the suggestion of a contrast but (b) *the stimulus of a challenge*.

There is little challenge in any realm of life to those who are merely spectators. There is no challenge facing the man in the crowd watching a football match. He shouts his approbation or disapproval. He says what ought to be done and criticizes the players who are not doing it. But it is easy for him to talk. Put that same man on the field and see what he makes of it and see whether even he can do the things he says ought to be done.

There is little challenge to the man who stands on the shore but never enters the water to do battle with the wind and waves. And so it is that there is very little challenge to the life of the Christian who sits within the seclusion of the Church and its fellowship and never comes into conflict with the world.

In a sense, up to the time that they heard this directive of the Master there had been little challenge in the life even of the disciples, little, that is to say, compared with what they faced now. For now they were going out alone into the world. The challenge came to them along a twofold line. First of all a challenge as to their understanding of their message.

Up to now they had merely sat and listened while the Master taught, but now they themselves were to do the preaching. What did they themselves really believe? What was the character and content of the gospel they were to preach? Was it really true?

What a challenge this was as they went out as "Ambassadors for Christ". It is a challenge I am sure that many Christians have never accepted. They are content to come to church and listen to a minister preaching, but as for taking the message of the Christian faith on their own lips and proclaiming that to others, they just couldn't do that. Very often because they have never taken the trouble, they have never faced the challenge of really understanding what the Christian gospel actually is.

The second element which constituted a challenge to these disciples was not only in the realm of their understanding of the message but also a challenge to their faith in the undertaking of their Master. He promised them that power would be theirs. The task was not to be done in human strength but in divine strength. The task was quite beyond their own resources, but not beyond His. It would only be proved that this was so as they obeyed the call and faced the challenge, and went forth in His Name.

Here we have, then, a directive which is plain, and also (2) *A Duty which is Personal.*

They were to "make disciples": so reads the Revised Version. The words of our Lord's commission did not say

to make converts, or even to make Christians, but to make disciples. I think there is something here that may help us—it has at least helped me—the meaning behind the word disciple is that of learner. We are to make “learners”. For a disciple is one who is being taught, who is learning. If we get that conception of our task in witnessing to others it may help us. If my duty is to teach others by lip and by life concerning the Master, then note what follows.

There will be (a) *The ignorance we may expect*. The teacher is prepared to meet that ignorance, and on finding it feels no sense of surprise and utters no word of condemnation. If you ask somebody to teach you to skate you would not expect them to start teaching with the assumption that you already knew all there was about it. Yet how often when Christians come into touch with people who are new to the Message of Jesus Christ, they condemn and criticize the folk they meet because of their ignorance of the gospel. They find they don't know their Bibles, they don't understand their language, they don't behave in the same way, they just don't know!

Of course they don't know. God doesn't expect them to and neither should we, for it is a teacher's job to teach. I feel that a great deal of so-called Christian witness is doomed to failure from the start, because it is offered to people in a spirit of censure and criticism. A spirit which they themselves can detect.

I have never forgotten the help given me by Bishop Taylor-Smith when he said to me that when he approached a stranger about Christian things, he always did it with the assumption that they were Christians and would agree with everything that he himself believed. If in the course of conversation he discovered that they were not Christians, and did not agree, then it was natural to speak, but by approaching them in this spirit and attitude he was able to avoid a spirit of censor-

ship and criticism which would have crippled and silenced his approach.

Do let us remember that Christ was the friend of sinners and not their critic, and that even as He was full of grace and truth, so must we be.

If our task then is to make learners there will also be (b) *the instruction we must give*. If I am to help others to learn, then I myself, their teacher, must know my subject.

If we think this through we will realize, first of all, the need for preparation. Before I go out to teach I myself must learn what my message is, so that I can express it. I sometimes feel myself that one of the chief reasons why so many Christians have so little to say to others about their Lord is that they themselves know so little.

I wonder if all of us have formed the habit of daily prayer and daily Bible study, so that we ourselves are prepared. We know what we believe and are able to put into words the content of our faith. I won't be much good at teaching others if I myself don't know what I am talking about. There will be a need of preparation and also a need of patience. How impatient we are so often in our work for God. We expect others to learn and grasp at one hearing the truth of God, forgetting how slow we ourselves were to learn the gospel, forgetting indeed how slow we still are to learn His ways. Our conversion, it is true, may have taken place at a given moment, but what long processes preceded that day and hour! How many had prayed for us, how many had spoken to us, how many sermons and addresses we had listened to, how many books we had read!

In fact, what a long road we travelled before we reached the place of decision for Christ. And as in any day school or university any teacher must be prepared to go over the same ground patiently again and again, so we too must be prepared to be patient.

I myself am a keen fisherman and I find that whenever I make this fact known in a group of people, someone is almost certain to say, "I don't know how you have got the patience for it." Our Lord said we are to be fishers of men, and one of the characteristics of any successful fisherman is his patience.

If we are to make learners, there will be this one other thing to remember, and that is (c) *The illustration we must afford.*

Today we hear a great deal about visual aids in education, and the Church itself is turning to this more and more. We have our films and film strips, our flannelgraph, our object talks. This is but a recognition of the vital importance of illustration in the work of teaching. St. Paul knew something of that when he said on one occasion, "Be ye followers of me."

This comes with a note of tremendous challenge to the Christian worker and teacher. Do we illustrate in our lives the message we proclaim? Do we illustrate the gospel or do we caricature it?

Have you come across the little saying, "If every Christian was the same as me what sort of church would my church be?" Well, what sort of church would it be? There ought to be clear illustration in the life of every Christian of the Christian gospel and way of life.

One of the most remarkable verses in the whole of the New Testament is the verse John 1: 14, where we read: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

How closely John had lived to his Lord, and how long. And yet in the closeness of that intimacy never once did John discern a flaw in the character of his Lord, but at the end of those years of close fellowship with the Master his testimony was "We beheld his glory."

Alas, of so many of us it has to be said that distance lends enchantment to the view. How close an examination can the quality of your Christian experience stand? How far does it really illustrate the message you proclaim?

The final note that is stressed in the words of our Lord concern (3) *A Dynamic which is Provided*. "All power is given unto me . . . Lo, I am with you always." We want to note here first of all *the authority that is resident in Christ*. We might have expected our Lord to say "All power is given unto you, Go ye", but no, we find Him saying, "All power is given unto Me."

Spiritual power and authority is a dangerous thing and God doesn't entrust it to anybody. This is a monopoly which is divinely held and only administered through those whom God feels He can trust. But none the less in the light of the completeness of the commission of our Lord, "All power is given unto Me, Go ye, and Lo, I am with you always", we find also here *the responsibility that remains with us*. For if Christ is with us, then we can and must go forth in the confidence of that abiding presence. We work, it is true, but only in so far as He works through us; but we never go forth alone, and in the final analysis in the realm of spiritual achievement and spiritual endeavour, the issues are not human but divine.

What a challenge all this is to Christians who remain comfortably lazy and inactive.

You may have heard the story which of course has no basis in truth, which nevertheless heads up the challenge of the commission of Christ to us. The story which relates how when our Lord returned to the glory, after the first thrill of rejoicing on His return, our Lord was speaking to the Archangel Gabriel, and after they had talked over something of the ministry of the work of redemption Gabriel said to our Lord something like this. "And now that you have done

all this for men, what plans have you made to carry the message of man's redemption to the ends of the earth?" To which our Lord is said to have replied, "Well, there is John and James and Peter and Andrew. A little group of men that I called and whom I have now commissioned. They are to take the message to the ends of the earth."

"But, Master, supposing that James and John and Peter and Andrew and the rest of the men whom you have called and commissioned to take this message, supposing they just don't go, supposing they stay where they are, what other plans have you made?" To which our Lord is supposed to have replied in these words: "If the men whom I have chosen and commissioned fail, I have made no other plan. I am counting on them."

Is it possible that here we touch the very heart of the problem of God in the life of the Church today? The fact is that God always reaches men through men, through their prayers, through their testimony, through their friendship, through their personality in different ways, but always with the same plan; reaching men through men.

God has no other plan, and it is just because He has no other plan and because so many of us are failing Him that the work of redemption is so slow. Today it may be that God's challenge will come to you afresh. "If these men fail, I have made no other plan. I am counting on them."

May God grant to each of us a fresh awareness of the terms of the great commission containing within it these three tremendous facts that we have here: first of all a Directive which is Plain; secondly, a Duty which is Personal; and thirdly the promise of a Dynamic which is Provided. May God grant that we may be faithful to the commission in our own lives.

"Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh . . . for when I am weak, then am I strong."

2 Cor. 12: 7-10

I 3

THE DISCIPLINE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

I WONDER how many Christians have been facing disappointments in their lives, and have discovered a tinge of bitterness creeping into their Christian experience. It may well be that our attitude towards our failings is rather like that of the person who says, "Yes, it is all very well for So-and-so, but you do not know what I am up against." It is very tempting to think that our lot is harder than the lot of another; to say, "It is easy for him to be so radiant, to be victorious." I have not travelled far in the Christian life but far enough to realize that that attitude can be quite unjust. One of the lessons I have learned has been through the unexpected discoveries of the secret sorrows of God's people. Again and again the wind of circumstance has blown aside the outer trappings, to reveal the sackcloth within upon the flesh. Behind the most radiant life there is often the most bitter trial, and that life which is so wonderfully used of God is at the same time most violently assailed.

Here in the pages of the New Testament the great apostle draws aside the veil, and lets us gaze upon his inner heart and

experience. How often people must have said of Paul, "Oh, it was easy for him, with his experience, his understanding, his knowledge." But as we gaze upon the heart of the great warrior saint, let us learn the lessons that God can and does teach the willing heart in the discipline of disappointment. There are three simple words that sum up, it seems to me, the teaching of this passage—frustration, revelation, and transformation.

Frustration. "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me . . . For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." Here we have revealed to us in the heart of the Apostle *the pressure* of a sore trial. The exact nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh is not revealed, but the language he uses is enough to indicate that it was a trial grievous to be borne. Was it something in the realm of his temperament and personality, this thing which made him so acutely aware of the old nature, with its weakness and sinfulness? Was it something in the nature of a physical disability which seemed to threaten his usefulness in God's service, so that its origin could only be ascribed to Satan? Or was it some factor in his spiritual environment which seemed to be against him, beating in upon his soul, opposing every step he took in obedience to the will of God? "A thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me." Whatever it was, it was something of which he was acutely aware, and something from which he longed desperately to be free; if only the pressure could be eased, if only the thorn could be removed, if only the health could be restored, if only the opposition would cease, if only . . . !

Let me ask, is there in your life the pressure of some sore trial? Has your thinking through the past weeks, months and years, been along this line—if only . . . ? "If only the pain could be relieved, if only my husband were keen, if

only my congregation were more responsive, if only I had better health, if only I had a different job, if only I were not so weak, if only . . ." I pray God that today we may learn to leave our "if onlys" behind us for ever.

Not only do I read here of the *pressure* of a trial, but of its *persistence*; and therein lay the disappointment—"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." Paul did what I expect you have done, and perhaps are still doing. To face this tremendous pressure in his life, he started praying about it. In Paul's valuation this thing had to go, it would be better if it went, God could use him far more without it. I do not claim to know anything of prayer in the measure that Paul knew it; all I know is that behind the phrase, "I besought the Lord", there must have been an intensity of desire about which most of us know very little. Have you been praying earnestly about your trial? Have you the same conviction as Paul about your thorn in the flesh, that you would be better off without it? Have you known what it has meant to pray that God would take it away? I want to learn with you as I notice this, not only that Paul started praying about it, but that he *stopped* praying about it. "I besought the Lord *thrice*," and then he did not pray about it any more. The prayer ceased, but the pressure continued; and although Paul never draws the veil aside again, as far as we know the pressure of that thorn remained right to the end of the road. And it may be, fellow-believer, that God wants you to stop praying, to stop asking Him to take out of your life something that He has no intention of removing.

The second word is *Revelation*. We read that after Paul stopped praying "He said unto me." In our praying about our trial is it possible that we have been so busy saying things to God that it may be we have not had time to listen to what He wants to say to us? And it may very well be that what

He wants to say to us will be rather like what He said to Paul. He talked to Paul about *a gracious purpose* in his trial. We can gather this from the fact that Paul speaks twice of this purpose—"Lest I should be exalted above measure." Paul was wrong in his valuation of this thorn in the flesh: it seemed to him not only useless, but worse than useless, a positive hindrance; and here he discovers that it is intensely important and valuable as God sees it. As long as he was made aware and kept conscious of the old nature dwelling within, he could be none other than "the chief of sinners". We may ask, why was it necessary? Surely a man of Paul's insight knew his own weakness—this man who could say, "In me . . . there dwelleth no good thing." Then why this trial? All I can say is that God must have known best what Paul needed, just as He knows best what you and I need. With such a man as Paul—I say it reverently—God could not afford to take any risks. Too much was at stake, and God wanted to make it as sure as He could that Paul's usefulness was not lost, and that he was kept for ever the humble, meek soul that God could beautify with His salvation, and use in His service. It was not enough that Paul's mind should give assent to the truth: God wanted it burnt into his very soul that without Christ he was nothing.

I cannot begin to think what may be God's purpose in the trial He permits in your life. I believe He will tell you. It may be a purpose concerning you and your character; or it may be a purpose that God is interested in through you: but, child of God, there *is* a purpose behind the pressure.

The second revelation that God made to Paul was that of *a glorious provision* for the trial—"My grace is sufficient for thee." Have you been praying that God would take something out of your life, that He would change your circumstance? and God is speaking to you, and is now telling you that this thing is going to remain; it is not going to be taken

away, the pressure is going to remain. Are you ready to believe that God has made adequate provision for your need?

If you are, then I want to suggest to you that the third word will come into your experience—frustration, revelation, *transformation*. And what a glorious transformation we find in him! It is a double transformation—of weakness into strength, “for when I am weak, then am I strong”; and of sadness into joy, “Most gladly therefore will I rather *glory* in mine infirmity.”

The transformation of weakness into strength. Is not your heart filled with a desire and eagerness and expectation that God will transform your weakness into His strength? Would it not be wonderful if that place which has seen again and again the breakdown of our faith and experience should be the scene of the building up of His strength, and that where we have been weak in the past we are going to be strong in the future? Would you not give a great deal for that experience to be yours?

How was it that this transformation came? I wish that Paul could be here to tell us; for we can only grope after the truth behind the words. I suggest that the transformation of his weakness may have had something to do with a kinship that Paul found between the thorn God gave to him and the thorns God gave to his Lord. Was the pressure of the thorn an immediate reminder of the power of the Cross? Was it Paul's experience that the pressure of this trial which made him aware of the existence and persistence of the flesh, the old nature within—making him desperately aware of his weakness and sinfulness and helplessness—at that very same moment in which he was made aware of “the flesh”, reminded him of the way of deliverance from its power in the Cross of Christ? It would almost seem to me as if the weapon that Satan had planned to use to overthrow the Apostle had been seized by the

Apostle out of the very hands of Satan, and had been turned into a weapon to overthrow the enemy. When Satan sent this trial, so that the old nature might be stimulated and aroused to life and sin, he found that all he did was to enable Paul, the moment he was reminded of its power and presence in his life, to hand it over once again in identification and faith to the Cross of Christ. The pressure of the thorn and the power of the Cross were bound and welded together in the heart of Paul, so that he could say, "When I am weak, then I am strong," as I know the power of His resurrection within me, being made conformable unto His death.

Would it not be wonderful if that experience could become ours, as we face that trial which is to remain in our lives! We are going to stop praying that it may be removed, and the pressure of that thorn is going to be for us transformed into the power of the Cross. Then, of course, the other transformation follows, the *transformation of our sadness into joy*—"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory—take pleasure—in my infirmities."

Has the sun gone out of the sky of your Christian experience? Has the song gone out of your heart? Has the Christian life become a desperately hard, dreary, drab drudgery? God wants to bring back the joy. He wants us to live what Bishop Taylor-Smith used to call "the life of continual rejoicing". In our experience of His overcoming power we shall find a new joy. There was nothing lovely about the crown of thorns which God gave to Christ; there may be nothing lovely about the thorn He has given to you. The cross was a harsh and cruel thing, an unjust thing, a hurtful thing, a dreadful thing. Your thorn and your trial may be all of that; and when today you look forward into the future, and you think that that thing is going to be in your life to the end of the road, it almost seems more than can be borne. Yet it will be transformed!

May I add just one more word? Did you notice that Paul said his trial was given by God? "There was given to me." You and I may have been trying to thrust something out of our lives which all the time God is holding out towards us, saying: "Take it, My child, it is My Gift."

I do not know what sort of Christmas present you used to like when you were small. There was one kind of Christmas present I never liked: it was what we called as children a "useful present"—a pair of gloves or even money: a pair of gloves compared with a Hornby engine seemed a dull, an almost unwanted gift. May I say very reverently that the thing which you and I want to be rid of out of our lives is in all probability in the mind and counsel of God a "useful gift"? It comes from Him. Will you take it from Him, and almost tremblingly and in fear give thanks to the Giver for the gift? The Saviour took the gift that God gave Him; He faced the thorns in Gethsemane, and it was a costly thing for him to say "Thank You" to the Father: but He did. And maybe God wants some of us to say, "Thank You, Lord, for Your gift to me."

Some years ago a Sunday School class was told the story of Gethsemane. One child was perplexed to understand why, after the failure of the disciples to accede to the request of the Saviour to watch and pray, the third time He came back to them Christ said to the disciples: "Sleep on now, and take your rest." The small child asked the teacher why it was that Jesus said this. The teacher could not at the moment think of an answer—Sunday School teachers are often placed in that position—when the child himself suddenly said, "Oh, I think I know why He said, 'Sleep on now'; it was because He had seen His Father's face, and did not need their help any more."

Oh, that you and I might see the Father's face, and not need the prayers and the help and the sympathy of others

any more! Disappointed, spiritually-tried child of God, may the pressure of the thorn in your life bring flooding in the power of the Cross of Christ, the power of His resurrection!

"The people . . . found grace in the wilderness."

Jer. 31: 2

I4

"GRACE IN THE WILDERNESS"

I REMEMBER well how these words in Jeremiah challenged me many years ago when I first stumbled on them. Recently they have challenged me afresh, and I want to share the nature and content of that challenge with you. The text speaks to me of

I. A PLACE THAT WAS DESOLATE. The people were in the wilderness; and life as we know it has at times a great deal in common with the wilderness. The wilderness is to me (i) *a place of dreariness*, of the same unvarying, unchanging monotony of desolation. One of the vivid memories of my recent flight to Kenya is of the vast expanse of desert wastes above which our plane flew for so long. But has not life something in common with this, sometimes? Have you known life to possess an unchanging, unattractive monotony that has made you think it scarcely worth living? And although you have looked in every direction, you have seen no possibility of change. A place that is desolate!

But this dreariness is due in the main to the fact that the wilderness is also (ii) *a place of death*. So little that is living is to be found there, not a hint of green of so much as a blade of grass, not the sound of a bird, not the movement of a living thing! Have you known life to be like that—indeed to

become like that—overnight—a place of death? Have you known what it is to see something die which has been precious to you beyond words? What a wilderness life is if love has died; and how many homes there are today where love has died, love between husband and wife. Show me such a home and I will show you a world that has become a wilderness; a world that once was full of fragrant hopes and fair and lovely promise, but is now a desolation and a ruin. What a wilderness life is if faith has died: the faith of friend in friend, or of parent in child, or child in parent, to discover in one terrible moment that the one we trusted utterly is unworthy of our trust. What a wilderness life is if hope has died, if our dreams fade finally and for ever before our very eyes. Have you known what it is to live on through the most severe trial, sustained only by the hopes, the dreams of what might be, of what you pray desperately one day will be? and then in one terrible moment you are stunned by the discovery, in the cold light of facts you cannot ignore, that your dream has vanished, your hopes have died, and in an hour your whole world has turned grey.

But the wilderness is not only a place of dreariness and of death, it is also (iii) *a place of danger*. The fact that it is a place of death spells danger to the living who enter it, who have to pass that way. Every ancient caravan trail through the great deserts of the world has been marked by the whitened bones of men and beasts who have perished ere they could emerge from the desert. And the supreme peril that threatens the souls of men when they enter upon the wilderness experiences of life, is not so much that so many of the lovely and precious things in life are found to have died there, but that life itself is imperilled, that they themselves should perish in the desolate wastes. Many a life of usefulness to God has been lost in some wilderness of life, and nothing today remains save the whitened bones, the few traces and memories of a

life that had been lived, but lost. A place that is desolate—is it any wonder then that the words of our text speak also of

2. A PATH THAT WAS DREADED. No one ever took the way through the wilderness unless he had to, and no one who faced it did so in any spirit of happiness or enjoyment. The path would test every fibre in a man's courage, it would demand every atom of physical endurance; survival of life itself would be constantly in the balance. Is it any wonder that the wilderness was a dreaded place, and the path through it shunned and avoided, taken only of sheer necessity!

What are the elements that make the wilderness paths of life, dreaded paths? I think first of (i) *the loneliness of the way*. You don't find many others in the wilderness. For days, for weeks it may be, you will journey on and on and never meet another living being. Does the soul know loneliness such as this? What loneliness is there to compare to life without love? To live on without anyone to care about us, to feel with us in our sorrows, to rejoice with us in our joys and triumphs, to share our burdens and anxieties, to quieten our fears. Since the day we knew the tenderness of a mother's love, every heart craves at times to be loved. But it may be that we are growing old, and almost all our loved ones have gone, there may even be no one left to care, and the way of life in our old age has become very lonely. Or our loneliness may be due to the fact that we are the only Christians in the family, or it may just be that love has died where once it lived, and loneliness instead of love is our portion, and the path through the wilderness has become a dreaded path.

But it may be that the path is dreaded because of (ii) *the hardness of the way*. The track through the wilderness is no easy road. It may mean oppressive heat by day, and at times biting cold at night; it speaks of parched lips and burning

thirst, blistered feet and aching limbs, it means a constant battle against weariness, the body crying out for respite, the mind knowing that to give in would mean to perish. Does the soul know hardness such as this? What way in life so hard as that where hope has died, when our dreams have vanished and gone? Parents have lived for a child, facing deprivation and sacrifice for themselves so as to give all they could to the one they loved. They have dreamed their dreams as to what their child would be and do; and then, one day, their dreams were broken, their hopes shattered, when death took the little one out of their arms and gave it back to God. Or it may have been some dream that kept a man going through all the hardness of life's way, some dream of future love and happiness. He loved a girl and had the promise of her love in return, and around that mutual love he built his life; and when the separation of the war years came, wherever he went he carried her picture in his heart and her name on his lips; and in the darkest hour the brightness of his dreams and hopes gave him courage to go on, to endure the hell he was going through—until the letter came that told him that his dreams were only dreams. Surely it is one of the hardest things in life to go on when hopes have died and dreams have faded, when the thing that gave you courage to go on is gone, when the longing and hope that were almost life itself suddenly wither and die. Yes, the hardness of the way makes the wilderness a dreaded path.

But the path is also dreaded because of (iii) *the emptiness of the way*. There is so little in the wilderness. Dust, sand, rocks, stones, heat—but there is no sound of running water, no whisper of the wind in the trees, no singing of the birds, no fragrance or beauty of flowers, no refreshing shade and green grass. Nothing but emptiness and silence. Does life not know something of this emptiness when faith has died?

Faith in another is the source of so much that enriches life, but to lose faith is to lose all. When the spring dries up it is not long before the ground it watered becomes arid and barren, dead and empty!

If our text had no more than this to say, it would be a sorry picture to draw; but I read of

3. A PROVISION THAT WAS DISCOVERED. "The people *found grace* in the wilderness." In that place that was desolate, on that path that was dreaded, in the most unlikely place, they made the most unexpected discovery. God's people have found three things which may make the wilderness blossom as the rose. The three things which I find in God's word to be associated with the wilderness are (i) *a daily provision*. Christ reminded His hearers on one occasion that "your fathers did eat manna *in the wilderness*". The manna was given daily, and had to be gathered daily. It was gathered early in the morning, or else not at all, for when the sun waxed hot it melted away. We are told that "the children of Israel did eat manna forty years until . . ." they left the wilderness. They had never seen it before, they never saw it afterwards; but while they were in the wilderness they never lacked the sustenance they needed. We need to learn this lesson, that God's grace is always commensurate with man's need. But I must take what God offers, and take it daily, or die.

The second thing I note concerning the wilderness is (ii) *the divine presence*. In Exodus 13: 18, 21, we read that the Lord "led the people about, through *the way of the wilderness* . . . and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light." I said earlier that the path through the wilderness was dreaded because of its emptiness and loneliness, but the one great fact which challenges the stumbling soul is that although life may be emptied of love, although the dreams and hopes that have buoyed us up and given us courage have

vanished, although even faith is broken, yet God remains. We are not alone. Life is not empty as long as God is in it. “He took not away the pillar from before the people.” The traveller throughout the wilderness is not unaccompanied. We are not forsaken. We are not desolate. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, and nothing can pluck us out of His hands. It is sometimes only “in the wilderness” that we discover the reality of His presence and the sweetness of communion with Him.

The last thing that I want to note with you as being associated with the wilderness is (iii) *the definite purpose*. In the book of Acts I read of a man in the midst of a thriving and happy ministry; but “the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south . . . unto Gaza, *which is desert* . . . and he arose and went: and, behold, a man . . .” I cannot believe that it was easy for Philip to go; but I can at least learn this, that there was a clearly defined purpose in the move, a purpose and plan that held something far beyond Philip’s knowledge or understanding. Philip was busy winning a town for Christ; God wanted him to win a nation. Although it meant leaving the warmth of fellowship in Samaria, and the thrill and wonder of witnessing God’s power, for the loneliness of the wilderness way, the day was to come when Philip would thank God for that wilderness experience—just as you and I will one day do, if we are as watchful and as obedient to the purpose of God in the wilderness. We may not understand, but it may well be that God is taking us to the wilderness just because there is someone else there that must be won, and He wants us to be the instrument in the winning of that one; and God alone knows what issues may depend upon the winning of that one to faith in Christ.

What God’s purpose is for you and for me in the wilderness I cannot begin to say; but this I do know, there is a

purpose, which if hidden to us at the moment is clear to the mind of God, and for which one day we shall thank God as we find ourselves in the number of people who "found grace in the wilderness".

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"My close study of the New Testament has convinced me that the basic needs of human personality have not changed with the passing centuries. The Good News which blazed in the pagan darkness of nearly 2,000 years ago is still the Good News in the fear-full, purposeless materialism which is the blight of modern life. The writers in this new series are all men whose preaching has been used by God to bring men to know him".

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